

Testimony Knowledge: Indigenous Research of Land, Story and Visual Narrative/Filmmaking in Northeast China

Zhang Hengtai

Supervised by: Dr Malcolm Maclean, Dr Marl'ene Edwin

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DECLARATION SHEET

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Abstract

This dissertation introduces Indigenous theories to the study of ethnic minority cultures in Northeast China, aiming to develop a localized Indigenous research paradigm. It addresses two core questions: How have the identity and cultural expressions of ethnic minorities in Northeast China been shaped by historical changes in territorial belonging, and how do Indigenous visual narratives reconstruct ethnic identities within the context of modernization?

This study engages in a cross-disciplinary dialogue, integrating Indigenous studies, visual anthropology, and post-colonial theories. It draws on the works of Indigenous scholars such as Jo-ann Archibald, Shawn Wilson, and Dorothy Christian to construct an analytical framework that emphasises the interconnectedness of land, storytelling, and cultural protocols in shaping Indigenous identities.

Methodologically, it adopts qualitative approaches grounded in Indigenous research methodologies, including participant observation, in-depth interviews, oral history, and ethnographic filmmaking. These methods are employed to gather stories and experiences from local ethnic communities, visual artists, and filmmakers in Northeast China, with a focus on the Manchu, Sibe, Evenki, and Oroqen peoples.

The findings reveal the complex negotiations of ethnic identity and cultural expression among Northeast China's Indigenous communities amid the challenges of modernization. Through analysing ethnographic documentaries such as Gu Tao's *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* (犴达罕, 2013) and Liu Yujia's *The Pale View of Hills* (远山淡景, 2018), this study highlights the resilience and creativity of Indigenous peoples in maintaining cultural continuity while adapting to social changes. The author's own documentary filming experience in Shifosi Village further illustrates the application of Indigenous theories in visual storytelling practices.

The work contributes to expanding the horizons of Chinese ethnic minority studies by introducing Indigenous perspectives and decolonizing methodologies. It also enriches the global discourse on Indigenous visual sovereignty by grounding it in the Chinese context. Practically, it sheds light on the often-overlooked Indigenous cultures of Northeast China, providing a nuanced understanding of their historical struggles and contemporary aspirations.

This dissertation not only bridges Indigenous studies with Chinese national minority research but also explores innovative ways to represent and empower Indigenous voices through visual narratives. It offers new perspectives for re-envisioning ethnic relations and cultural diversity in China under the context of globalization.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Cultural Retrospect

In my early memories, my understanding of the concept of "Identity" was relatively simple and singular. In the environment where I grew up, the people around me shared similar backgrounds and cultural experiences. We all considered ourselves “Chinese,” or more specifically, “Northerners” (东北人). In such an environment, I had little exposure to ethnic minorities, let alone explored their lives and cultures. As for the term “Indigeneity,” my initial understanding was relatively broad—it encompassed all the people living on this land. This perception was closely related to my upbringing, where people often shared similar values and lifestyles.

This research contributes to knowledge by integrating Indigenous methodologies, particularly “Storywork” and visual sovereignty into the study of land, identity, and visual representation in Northeast China. Unlike conventional ethnographic approaches that often frame ethnic minorities as passive subjects of study, this research centers local agency in storytelling. Through documentary filmmaking, it examines how Indigenous epistemologies provide alternative frameworks for conceptualizing ethnicity, land, and cultural representation within the Chinese academic and cinematic context.

My academic journey has shaped this approach. Initially, my perspective on identity was shaped by dominant Western theoretical frameworks, particularly concepts of self-reflexivity and identity formation. As Anthony Giddens states, in modern society, the individual must actively shape and reflect on their own identity through various choices (Giddens, 1992). As I delved deeper into my doctoral studies, however, my perspective on identity went through a significant shift. While writing a reflective

essay, I conducted a thorough review of my academic and artistic journey. This process came to a critical realization: my education, both theoretical and practical, was almost entirely based on Western educational systems and ideologies. This insight prompted me to question why my creative work rarely reflected my own cultural background.

This understanding strengthened my conviction that to truly understand and preserve our culture, we must approach it from our own perspective, rather than relying solely on or imitating Western viewpoints (Battiste, 2011). Consequently, I turned to global Indigenous perspectives in film and video (Wilson and Stewart, 2008), including Chinese documentary director Gu Tao, a documentary filmmaker of Manchu ethnicity, has captured the spiritual and cultural lives of Northern ethnic minorities through his films, such as *Aoluguya*, *Aoluguya* (敖鲁古雅, 敖鲁古雅, 2007) and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* (犴达罕, 2013). His work *Lost in Mountain* (乌鲁布铁, 2015) influenced my understanding of visual storytelling in Indigenous contexts, which I further explore in later chapters.

In the early stages of my academic exploration, I was fortunate to receive guidance from Timi O'Neil, my advisor during the first year of my doctoral studies. He recommended Jo-ann Archibald's (2008) book *Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit*, which advocates for the significant approach of "Storywork" as a decolonizing research methodology. This book not only delves into the central role of "story" and "storytelling" in Indigenous cultures but also reveals the colonial nature of mainstream academic research. It provides a new perspective for examining the current Western narrative-dominated academic environment (Archibald, 2008). For Indigenous peoples Archibald discusses, "stories" are not merely a form of literary expression or oral art; they are crucial mediums that carry the history, culture, values, and epistemology of their communities.

In China, academic research on ethnic minorities has predominantly been shaped by

state-defined ethnic classifications and Han-centric frameworks (Gladney, 1994). By integrating Indigenous methodologies, this research challenges these dominant narratives and repositions ethnic minorities as active agents in knowledge production. Through “Storywork”, communities in Northeast China can articulate their histories and land relations on their own terms, rather than through external academic or political classifications.

Background of Doctoral Research

The wave of globalization has swept across the world profoundly impacting the politics, economy, and culture of various countries (Singh, 2011, pp.53-66, Ben-Canaan et al., 2014). Against this backdrop, previously marginalized Indigenous groups have begun to awaken, striving for their rights and resisting the assimilation and control of foreign cultures. The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, signed by over 144 countries, aims to safeguard the political, economic, and cultural rights of Indigenous peoples (United Nations, 2007). It affirms their right to self-determination in matters concerning their communities and clearly states that any attempts at forced assimilation or control by external forces are illegal (Burger, 1987).

In this global movement for Indigenous rights, China’s silence stands out, especially as one of the world’s largest multi-ethnic countries. Scholars from both China and abroad have pointed out that China presents a perplexing case for Indigenous studies: the official Chinese ideology avoids or even rejects the concept of “Indigenous” and related terminology (Gladney, 1998, Yeh, 2007, Merlan, 2009, pp. 303-333). In China’s classification of its native ethnic groups, the concept of “ethnic minorities” predominates. Anthropologist Dru Gladney (1998) criticizes China’s avoidance of Indigenous discourse, arguing that the term “Minority ethnic group” (Shaoshu Minzu) is biased. He contends that it not only obscures their Indigenous identity but also conceals the multicultural and multi-ethnic nature of China. Furthermore, Chinese

academic research on ethnic minorities rarely approaches them from an Indigenous perspective.

The concept of “Indigenous peoples” as recognized in global discourse is closely tied to colonial histories, dispossession, and sovereignty struggles. However, in China, the government categorizes all ethnic groups under the “minzu” (民族) system, a classification framework that emerged from early 20th-century nationalist discourses and socialist state-building efforts (Mullaney, 2011). This system does not distinguish between colonized Indigenous peoples and other historically settled ethnic groups, instead positioning all recognized minorities as part of a unified national framework

Within this structure, the experiences of groups such as the Manchu, Sibe, Evenki, and Oroqen differ from Indigenous peoples in settler-colonial contexts, yet their deep-rooted connections to land, oral traditions, and cultural preservation efforts resonate with Indigenous epistemologies elsewhere. Rather than attempting to impose an external Indigenous identity, this research applies Indigenous methodologies as an analytical tool to understand how local communities in Northeast China articulate their identity and land relationships on their own terms.

Global Indigenous theories provide a valuable framework for understanding land, identity, and sovereignty, but their application in the Chinese context requires careful adaptation. In China, ethnic minorities are classified under the state-defined framework of “minzu”, which shapes both their official status and social perceptions. Many community members do not identify as “Indigenous” in the sense the term is used globally; instead, they refer to themselves as “locals” (本地人) or “Northeasterners” (东北人). Their sense of identity is deeply rooted in historical, social, and political contexts rather than in the legal and political discourses of Indigenous rights found in settler-colonial states. This research does not impose external classification but instead explores how community members define their connection to land and history in their own terms.

In this backdrop, how do Northeast ethnic minorities negotiate and reshape their identities through cultural practices? What transformations have their relationships with the land, historical memory, and traditions undergone? Reflecting on the current situation of Northeast ethnic minorities is crucial for understanding ethnic issues in China's modernity process and exploring the question of Indigeneity within the Chinese context (Ma, 2007, pp.12-38).

In the exploration of ethnic minority identities and China's modernization process, cultural texts play a vital role. Art forms such as film, literature, and music not only record and reflect the cultural practices of ethnic minorities but also actively participate in shaping their identities (Berry and Farquhar, 2006). These cultural products serve as mediums for dialogue between tradition and modernity, between marginal and mainstream cultures. In the distinctive borderland region of Northeast China, this process of cultural production and identity construction is particularly complex and significant. While mainstream media has predominantly focused on industrial narratives, cultural texts have become crucial tools for expressing diverse regional identities, from working-class struggles to ethnic minority experiences. These varied representations offer insights into how different communities navigate their place in contemporary China.

Industrial symbols have long shaped the visual identity of Northeast China, deeply ingrained in both the material landscape and cultural imagination. As Hou Xiaolong observes, cinematic representations of Northeast China overwhelmingly revolve around the decline of heavy industry and the social dislocation caused by State-Owned Enterprise reforms (Hou, 2022, pp. 71-93). Films such as *The Piano in a Factory* (钢的琴, 2010) depict the struggles of laid-off steelworkers, using the image of abandoned factories as a metaphor for the decline of industrial prosperity. Similarly, *Tie Xi Qu* (铁西区, 2003) documents the gradual decay of Shenyang's industrial districts, capturing the fading presence of the working class. Though never

released in theaters, the documentary was later incorporated into China's official industrial memory through its inclusion in the China Industry Museum. This paradoxical appropriation highlights how independent narratives of economic dislocation can be reframed within state discourse, transforming what was once a critique of industrial collapse into a commemorative artifact of socialist industrial history. More recent works, such as *The Long Season* (漫长的季节, 2023) and *Lucky Dog* (耳朵大有福, 2008), reflect on the emotional complexities surrounding industrial decline while also reinforcing regional identity through the Northeastern dialect.

It is worth considering whether industrial heritage alone can truly define the region's identity. While these films play a significant role in constructing the visual discourse of the Northeast, they overlook the presence and contributions of Indigenous communities. Beyond the narratives of factories and working-class struggles, Northeast China has long been home to the Manchu, Sibe, Evenki, and Oroqen peoples, whose cultural expressions remain largely absent from mainstream representations. In contrast to the industrial imagery of the Rust Belt, local visual narratives offer a counterpoint that emphasises deep-rooted connections to land, seasonal rhythms, and non-industrial ways of life.

In this context, ethnographic documentaries emerge as crucial tools for recording and preserving the culture of ethnic minorities. These documentaries not only provide a window into the customs and traditions of ethnic minorities but also serve as bridges facilitating interaction between tradition and modernity, and between marginalized and mainstream cultures (He, 2018). However, current ethnographic documentaries on Northeast ethnic minorities still face limitations in content and form, affecting their effectiveness in cultural preservation. A significant number of these documentaries focus on the "rescue documentation" of traditional cultures, neglecting the ongoing development and modernization challenges of ethnic cultures, and failing to present the autonomy and inner complexities of these groups. In terms of form, their narratives are often limited to linear structures, lacking in-depth exploration of

multiple perspectives and layers, and falling short in artistic expression and emotional depth. These limitations hinder the documentaries' ability to fully capture the dynamic and multifaceted nature of these ethnic communities, and to engage audiences in a more profound, nuanced manner. (Wan, 2017, Guan, 2020)

The works of ethnographic documentary director Gu Tao offer valuable case studies in this exploration. His ethnographic trilogy provides a panoramic view of the Evenki people's struggle between tradition and modernity. His narrative approach offers new perspectives for the creation of ethnographic documentaries (Sun, 2016, pp.122-142). Analysing Gu Tao's documentaries offers a deeper understanding of the survival state of Northeast ethnic minority cultures in the modern context and further explore the role and mission of ethnographic documentaries in cultural preservation.

I aim to use ethnographic documentaries as a starting point to introduce an Indigenous theoretical perspective, exploring the complex negotiations of Northeast ethnic minorities' modernity, ethnicity, and Indigeneity. The distinctive historical experiences of Northeast China, particularly the colonial history in modern times, have profoundly shaped the region's contemporary landscape.

Research Purpose and Research Question

Within the scope of global, national, and regional Indigenous visual narratives and ethnographic documentaries, this doctoral research aims to employ Indigenous theoretical perspectives to enrich the understanding of land and identity issues among ethnic minorities in Northeast China. This study seeks to expand the application of visual anthropology in the Chinese context, thereby enriching and extending the conceptual ideas within the discourse of Indigenous visual narratives and film theory on both global and national levels (Knopf, 2008, Raheja, 2010, Rickard, 2011, Christian, 2017).

This section reveals how narratives about land influence the creative decisions of Indigenous visual storytellers, emphasising land as a vital cultural and spiritual resource. The study will investigate how these communities narrate and represent their relationship with the land to maintain and reshape their cultural identity. This part will reveal how land stories influence the creative choices of Indigenous visual narrators, emphasising the importance of land as a cultural and spiritual resource. The following questions guide my exploration:

What is the intrinsic connection between land and the identity of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, and how do land stories influence the creative choices of Indigenous visual storytellers?

What distinctive visual styles and elements are presented in Northeast ethnographic documentaries, and how do these styles and elements achieve cultural coherence and authentic representation?

In Chapter Seven, I explain my use of the term “visual sovereignty.” From an Indigenous perspective, the concept of visual sovereignty is about self-representation and the aesthetic control of images by Indigenous cultural creators. This concept was first introduced by Jolene Rickard in 1995 and further discussed in 2011. Subsequently, Michelle Raheja made significant contributions to this discussion in 2011 and Dorothy Christian, in her dissertation, emphasised the importance of visual sovereignty for Indigenous visual culture in 2017. She argues that visual sovereignty ensures Indigenous cultural self-expression and aesthetic autonomy through control of visual narratives and artistic expression, resisting colonial narratives and maintaining cultural integrity and responsibility (Christian, 2017, p.13).

On this basis, I deploy the concept of visual sovereignty in this discussion of Northeast Indigenous visual culture. By analysing and practicing Northeast ethnographic documentaries, I provide new perspectives and pathways for the

preservation and development of Indigenous culture, promoting mainstream society's attention to Indigenous voices and applying this concept to ethnographic documentary creation. This visual sovereignty incorporates Jo-ann Archibald's "Storywork" methodology, which guided my ethnographic documentary creation in Shifosi Village (石佛寺). The choice of Shifosi as the site for ethnographic documentary creation is due to its profound historical and cultural background and rich cultural heritage, providing abundant material and cultural context. Furthermore, as one of the main settlements of the Sibe people, Shifosi Village, with its cultural traditions and deep connection to the land, serves as a place for recording a distinctive ethnic culture and identity.



Figure 1 The Main Entrance of Shifosi Village (Screenshot from author's documentary)

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is to explore the central role of land in the culture and identity of ethnic minorities in Northeast China. Through in-depth interviews and field research with local community members, I will demonstrate how land serves as a carrier of cultural memory and identity, influencing and shaping the lifestyles and cultural expressions of ethnic minorities. Another goal is to analyse the complex relationship between modernity and Indigeneity in the cultural expressions

of Northeast China, particularly the impact of industrialization and globalization on traditional culture and identity. Through conversations with local artists and culture bearers in Northeast China, I will reveal the impact of modernity on traditional culture and how cultural bearers engage in cultural preservation and innovation within this context.

To visualize the complex relationship between modernity and Indigeneity in Northeast China and the identity issues of ethnic minorities, I will employ Indigenous visual storytelling. By applying and evaluating the principles of Archibald's Indigenous "Storywork" which are respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy (Archibald, 2019, p.33), to ensure cultural congruency in my documentary work.

Indigenous Research Methodology in the Chinese Context: A Theoretical Reflection

When I first decided to employ Indigenous research methodology in my research, I did not anticipate a key conceptual dilemma that would soon emerge. A fundamental question emerged: Can Indigenous research methodologies be applied outside of settler-colonial contexts, particularly in China? Given that China does not officially recognize indigeneity, certain scholars have questioned whether these methodologies are relevant in a society that classifies ethnic minorities under the state-defined minzu system rather than as Indigenous peoples. This question became particularly relevant as I examined the tensions between global Indigenous research frameworks and the Chinese academic landscape.

In her doctoral dissertation, Dorothy Christian notes a "fundamental divergence" in how knowledge is positioned, analysed, and interpreted between Indigenous and Western epistemologies (Christian, 2017, p.131). From the perspective of North

American Indigenous scholars, Indigenous research methodologies are inherently opposed to Western academic structures and functions as a practice of decolonization (Archibald, 2008). However, my discussions with scholars from China revealed contrasting views. In a conversation with my former mentor, Cheng Yuanzheng, I introduced my approach of using Indigenous research methodology to study local visual culture in Northeast China. She expressed confusion, questioning why I was applying Western methodologies to research Chinese Indigenous cultures. When I explained that the core of Indigenous research methodologies lies in decolonization, she remarked, “This is precisely a theoretical system developed from the discourse of North America and the West.” (Cheng Yuanzheng, Personal communication, translated by Zhang Hengtai, September 2023).

This critique prompted me to reflect on how Indigenous methodologies interact with Western epistemologies. Although it is undeniable that Western modernity deeply shapes contemporary academia and global intellectual structures, I take a more nuanced view than Cheng’s. As Smith states, “The West represents the Indigenous world, and it is often through these disciplines that Indigenous peoples research for the fragments of ourselves that were taken, categorized, studied, and stored” (Smith, 2021, p.74). In this sense, when Indigenous research frameworks emerge from scholars working within Western academic institutions, their core purpose remains one of resistance, relational knowledge production, and narrative sovereignty.

Indigenous research methodologies extend beyond legal or political definitions of Indigeneity, centering instead on relational epistemologies, land-based knowledge, and community-driven storytelling. Although China does not officially recognize Indigenous peoples, ethnic communities in Northeast China, such as the Manchu, Sibe, Evenki, and Oroqen, maintain place-based cultural traditions, oral histories, and ancestral land connections that align with Indigenous research paradigms.

This methodological reflection is central to my research as I apply Indigenous

research methodologies not as an imposed classification, but as an alternative knowledge system that prioritizes community voices, relational accountability, and decolonized storytelling. The following sections further explore how this methodological approach is integrated into my research design, fieldwork, and visual ethnography in Shifosi Village.

Indigenous Perspective: Research Design and Methodology

In exploring the culture and visual expressions of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, I have drawn on the perspectives and methodologies of several Indigenous theorists, including Jo-ann Archibald's "Storywork" theory (2019), Shawn Wilson's (Wilson, 2008) Indigenous research methodology, and Dorothy Christian's (Christian, 2017) Indigenous film aesthetics. These theories and methodologies provide a multidimensional perspective for my research, helping me to gain a deeper understanding of the cultural identity, knowledge systems, and relationship to the land of Northeast China's ethnic minorities. In terms of research design, I primarily employ qualitative research methods, combining fieldwork, oral history, and visual ethnography. These methods not only assist in data collection and analysis but also ensure cultural sensitivity and ethical responsibility throughout the research process.

Jo-ann Archibald's "Storywork" theory emphasises the central role of stories in the transmission of Indigenous knowledge. She emphasises that the interaction between the story, the storyteller, and the listener creates a synergy, generating meaning through the stories and prompting people to strive to understand these meanings (Archibald, 2008, p.ix). This theory inspired me to delve deeply into the oral history and cultural traditions of Northeast ethnic minorities during my fieldwork. For example, in Shifosi, I interviewed Jiao Wanju, who is of Han ethnicity but lives with other Sibe and Manchu people in Shifosi. He narrated legends about the Buddha statues in Shifosi and the history of Qi Xing Shan (七星山). These stories not only enriched my research content but also allowed me to deeply understand how

Northeast ethnic minorities construct and transmit collective memory and cultural identity related to the land through stories.

Incorporating Shawn Wilson's Indigenous research methodology, I recognize that all entities are interconnected, a connection that extends beyond human relationships to include relationships between humans and the environment, and humans and the spiritual world. As Wilson states, "All knowledge is cultural and based on a relational context; therefore, we need a methodology and values that are responsible for the relationships we form in the pursuit of enlightenment" (Wilson, 2008, p.96). Wilson's perspective guides this exploration of the changes in territorial and cultural identity in Northeast China across historical periods, revealing the complex interactions between people and the land. Wilson also notes, "Research is conducted by human being, feeling, living, breathing, thinking human beings. The idea that we can separate ourselves from the real world and pretend to be objective is not real in the real world" (Wilson, 2008, p.101). This theoretical framework encourages me to establish respectful and reciprocal relationships with local Indigenous people during my fieldwork, listening to their voices and understanding their spiritual connections to the land. Wilson emphasises that "research must be community-based and demonstrate respect, reciprocity, and responsibility in its implementation" (Wilson, 2008, p.120). Following Wilson's guidance, I aim to ensure the authenticity and credibility of the research through continuous feedback and reciprocal engagement with all participants.

In terms of methodology, I utilized various research strategies to ensure the depth and breadth of the study. Firstly, fieldwork was conducted, including participant observation and in-depth interviews, to obtain first-hand cultural data from Indigenous peoples. This approach not only helped me understand the lives and cultures of the subjects but also allowed me to capture their worldview and value systems from an insider's perspective.

Documentary filmmaking was another key strategy for documenting and representing the cultural practices and daily lives of ethnic minorities in Northeast China. Dorothy Christian's Indigenous film aesthetics theory guided my practice in visual expression. She emphasises that excellent Indigenous films should incorporate cultural elements such as outfit and convey a distinctive sense of rhythm and meaning. In her dissertation, Christian states, "Indigenous aesthetics begin with the sacred... they are connected to our actions of responsibility and relationality that we embody through the chosen elements of our film/video production" (Christian, 2017, p.281). In the documentary *Twilight over the Silent Hill*, I focused on capturing cultural details and aesthetic characteristics through visuals to reflect the daily lives, spiritual practices, and connection to the land of ethnic minorities in Northeast China more authentically and delicately. Christian also emphasises that Indigenous cultural values are an intrinsic part of the overall Indigenous knowledge system, reflected in how we know, see, act, listen, and learn (Christian, 2017, p.287).

Throughout the research process, ethical considerations remained central throughout the research process. Shawn Wilson notes that for Indigenous people, reality is based on relationships, and the entire research process should reflect relational accountability, respecting and strengthening the connections among all entities (Wilson, 2008, p.107). This inspired me to build relationships grounded in equality and respect during both fieldwork and documentary production, ensuring that every step of the research and filming process adheres to cultural and ethical norms.

Learning From the Land: A Journey of Self-Discovery

Before embarking on this research journey, I questioned my relationship with the land in Northeast China. I undertook this doctoral dissertation to understand how culture can establish our own visual sovereignty in my future artistic creations and teaching. In the process, I engaged in conversations with my parents about our family history and learned that my great-grandparents were of Sibe ethnicity. Although my official

identity is Han, as recorded on my Chinese ID card, I feel a stronger connection to my Sibe heritage after delving deeply into Sibe culture throughout this research. However, as an indigenous researcher, I still consider myself a beginner in understanding the intricacies of this culture.

In May 2023, I drove to my father's and mother's hometown, North Da Zi Ying (北达子营). During the early Qing Dynasty, the Sibe settled there with the Manchu Eight Banners soldiers, forming a village. Since it was predominantly inhabited by the Sibe people, the surrounding Han people called it "Da Zi Ying." The name "Da Zi Ying" refers to a Sibe settlement because, during the early Qing Dynasty, the Sibe, alongside Manchu Eight Banners soldiers, established villages in areas like this one. The word "鞑子" (Da Zi) reflects the Han people's perspective and naming conventions for places associated with non-Han ethnic groups, often carrying a sense of cultural distinction or otherness. This term is tied to the historical context of the phrase "驱除鞑虏" (Drive out the Dalu), which reflects the strong anti-Manchu sentiment during the early Qing period, highlighting the resistance of the Han people to Manchu rule. In 1980, following the nationwide directive to change place names that were derogatory to ethnic minorities, the village was renamed Xingang (新岗) (Chen, 2021, Chen, 2022).

Growing up, I was primarily influenced by Han culture, as both my parents and their ancestors identified as Han. This was largely due to the broader narrative of national unity and ethnic harmony that has shaped our collective understanding. As such, I was taught to see myself as part of the larger Han majority, even though my ancestral roots trace back to the Sibe. The information on the ID card does not always align with an individual's self-identity. Jiao Wanju, when discussing ethnic identity in Shifosi Village, mentioned that "many years ago, the government conducted blood tests to determine our ethnicity." This process reflects a broader historical context where ethnic identities were sometimes arbitrarily assigned or classified, which can result in a disconnect between how one is officially recognized and how one personally

identifies.

Minority status in China often carried certain advantages. For instance, in the highly competitive Chinese university entrance exam, the “Gao Kao,” (高考) students with minority ethnic status could receive additional points (Gao, 2014, pp. 94-99).

Similarly, during the era of collective farming under the “People’s Commune,” minority villagers were often granted extra benefits. These advantages, however, do not necessarily align with the individual’s own sense of identity, highlighting the complexity of ethnicity as both a social and official construct.

In the early stages of my doctoral research, I sought to establish a deeper connection with the land, searching for places that had not yet been eroded by modernity and globalization, to uncover cultural traces. However, I realized that the former village of North Da Zi Ying, which once held much of my ancestral heritage, had been completely urbanized. Determined to continue my search for traces of the Sibe, I traveled to Shifosi Village, another settlement inhabited by both the Sibe and the Manchu.

Shifosi Village is located in the northwest of Shenbei New District (沈北新区), Shenyang, Liaoning Province, and has a history of over 1,000 years. It is named after a Liao Dynasty temple on Qi Xing Shan to the north. During the Liao Dynasty (916-1234 AD), Shuangcheng County Government Office was established there. In the Ming Dynasty, Shifang Fort (石方寺) was built, becoming an important military stronghold in northern Shenyang. Due to its proximity to the military frontier, the population decreased and the village gradually declined. After the establishment of the Qing Dynasty, some Sibe people moved here in 1699, reviving the village and making it one of the main settlements of the Sibe in Shenyang (Liu and Hao, 2021, pp.129-134, Wang et al., 2022, pp.115-117).

During my research in Shifosi Village, I engaged deeply with the land and the local

people as a person of Sibe descent. The fact that my great-grandparents were also Sibe made this interaction even more meaningful. Sharing historical and cultural stories with the villagers gradually dispelled my doubts about my relationship with the land, allowing me to rediscover my deep connection to it and strengthen my cultural identity.

This research path is not only an academic exploration but also a way of life that is integrated with my daily activities. I am committed to participating in the community's daily activities, maintaining an ongoing relationship with the land and its people. I often drive to Shifosi Village to communicate with the villagers, participate in labour, patrol the mountains, fish, and take part in community events such as a funeral in the winter of 2023. This deep interaction fulfils my responsibilities to the community, land, and people, further strengthening my connection and cultural identity with Shifosi Village.

Territory and Identity Reconstruction in Northeast China under the Context of Globalization

In the context of globalization, the concepts of territory and identity are being reshaped and questioned. This reshaping is particularly evident in Northeast China. From the Qing Dynasty, Russian and Japanese colonial rule, to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the land and identity of Northeast China have undergone multiple transformations. In this process, the concepts of "Deterritorialization" and "Reterritorialization" provide us with a powerful tool to understand this complex history. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari first introduced the term "Deterritorialization" in "Anti-Oedipus" to describe the disjunction of social or cultural practices from their native populations (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972). This concept encompasses immigrants, refugees, exiles, hyphenated minorities, and other dispersed communities who leave their homeland for various reasons, whether voluntarily or involuntarily.

Indigenous peoples are often misunderstood or improperly contextualized in such discussions, potentially due to an academic hesitance to fully recognize the deep connections between Indigenous communities and their ancestral lands. Theories and analyses of globalization often overlook the actual impact on Indigenous communities and their lands. Dorothy Christian points out that the discourse on globalization shows how European Western knowledge continues to apply neo-colonial methods without decolonizing or deconstructing its ideological approaches towards Indigenous peoples (Christian, 2017, pp.94-95). Arjun Appadurai, in his analysis of globalization and Deterritorialization, also overlooks the distinctiveness of Indigenous peoples, providing a rationale for transnational corporations to exploit Indigenous lands.

Applying this theory to the land in Northeast China reveals shifts from Qing rule, Japanese occupation, to the establishment of the People's Republic of China, all involving processes of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization. From Qing governance to Japanese colonial rule and the founding of the People's Republic of China, the region and its people underwent significant territorial and cultural transformations.

Shao Dan (2011) in her work *Remote Homeland, Recovered Borderland: Manchus, Manchukuo, and Manchuria*, offers a detailed analysis of these changes. She explains that during the Qing Dynasty, Northeast China was regarded as the birthplace and core territory of the Manchu, with Manchu culture being consolidated and developed during this period. However, during the Japanese occupation, the establishment of Manchukuo attempted to redefine and reshape Manchu identity to serve its colonial rule. This redefinition involved not just the occupation of territory but also the Deterritorialization of culture and identity.

During the Japanese occupation, Manchu culture and identity were greatly challenged and reconstructed. Japan attempted to assimilate the Manchu into its colonial system

through cultural assimilation policies, weakening the Manchu's connection to their traditional lands (Shao, 2011, 109). This cultural assimilation effort was a typical process of Deterritorialization, trying to consolidate control over the land by changing cultural identity. However, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, Northeast China underwent a process of Reterritorialization again. In consolidating national unity, sought to rebuild cultural and identity recognition in Northeast China through policies and propaganda. This process was both a counteraction to the influence of Japanese colonial rule and a re-identification of the cultures of the Manchu and other ethnic minorities (Shao, 2011, p.112).

Theoretical Gaps and Localized Practice

In contemporary studies of Chinese ethnic minorities, the absence of Indigenous perspectives represents a significant gap. Mainstream research often adopts Western theoretical frameworks, simplifying and homogenizing ethnic minority cultures while neglecting the agency of Indigenous peoples in cultural transmission and identity formation (Merlan, 2009, pp. 303-333, Yeh, 2007). This research paradigm not only fails to comprehensively reflect the complex situations of ethnic minorities but also overlooks the distinctiveness value of Indigenous knowledge systems. As Kovach states, "Knowledge itself has cultural and political attributes" (Kovach, 2009, p.30). Her viewpoint emphasises the necessity of incorporating Indigenous voices and perspectives to ensure the comprehensiveness and authenticity of research on ethnic minorities.

Moreover, Indigenous knowledge is distinctive because it is emplaced and intimately connected with the land (Coulthard, 2014, Simpson, 2017). This grounded normativity reflects the worldviews, ethics, and practices of Indigenous communities, forming the foundation of their identity, cultural continuity, and political resistance. In the context of de-/re-/territorialization, territorialization embeds Indigenous knowledge within the land, while reterritorialization restores and reaffirms Indigenous peoples' ties to their

territories, revitalizing traditional knowledge. By reestablishing a sense of place, Reterritorialization fosters a renewed cultural identity and strengthens the resilience of Indigenous groups in contemporary society (Masenya, 2024). Furthermore, it serves as a political act of resistance, challenging colonial narratives and asserting sovereignty over lands that are integral to their worldview and way of life. While Deterritorialization can sometimes lead to adaptive innovations or new cultural forms, it often results in the fragmentation and weakening of Indigenous knowledge systems. Forced relocations, land dispossession, and environmental degradation are particularly harmful, as they sever the relational ties between communities and their traditional territories (i Martí, 2006, pp. 92-107). This disconnection disrupts the transmission of knowledge, diminishes cultural practices, and undermines the distinctiveness of Indigenous worldviews.

The application of Indigenous theories and methodologies in Chinese academia remains relatively limited, though some scholars have made beneficial attempts. Zhang Yansuo, in her research on the Qiang people in Sichuan, introduced an Indigenous theoretical perspective, revealing how Qiang elites assert their ethnic authenticity and reconstruct historical memory through discourse practices and cultural entrepreneurship (Zhang, 2021, pp. 423-450). This demonstrates the potential of Indigenous theories in understanding the cultural identity strategies of Chinese ethnic minorities. In the field of visual anthropology, Gu Tao's ethnographic documentaries vividly depict the survival struggles of northern Chinese ethnic minorities through Indigenous discourse (Sun, 2016, pp.122-142, Wan, 2017). However, the localization of Indigenous research paradigms within the Chinese context remains quite limited. This study, grounded in the specific context of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, draws on international Indigenous theories to propose a theoretical framework and research methods with local characteristics, thereby deepening the understanding of Chinese ethnic minority issues through a cross-cultural and comparative ethnographic perspective.

The research integrates multidisciplinary theoretical resources, including Indigenous theories, film aesthetics, and visual anthropology, and proposes an analytical framework incorporating innovative concepts such as “Indigenous Visual Storywork.” By creatively combining these theories, the study seeks to foster cross-disciplinary insights and deepen understanding of Indigenous contexts. Utilizing qualitative methods such as participatory observation, in-depth interviews, oral history, and ethnographic documentary filmmaking, the research engages deeply with Indigenous communities. The ethnographic documentary *Twilight Over the Silent Hill* reflects principles of “relationality” and “reciprocity” in Indigenous research (Wilson, 2008, Kovach, 2009). This creative practice not only broadens the aesthetic scope of Chinese ethnographic documentaries but also contributes new cultural references to global Indigenous visual research. Through immersive experiences and empathetic exchanges, first-hand data, opening new methodological pathways for visual Indigenous research.

Summary of Chapters

In chapter two, I explore the complexities and challenges faced by Northeast China’s ethnic minorities in the context of contemporary globalization. By combining global Indigenous theories with Chinese ethnic studies, the chapter aims to address the core issue: how Northeast China’s ethnic minorities negotiate and reconstruct their identities within the dual contexts of globalization and the nation-state. I trace the global conceptualization of Indigeneity, highlighting the complex relationships between identity, cultural heritage, and land rights. This discussion is enriched by examining the impact of globalization on these concepts, comparing Indigenous policies worldwide, and focusing on the Chinese government’s measures and limitations in protecting Indigenous rights. I analyse the theoretical integration of global Indigenous perspectives with localized Chinese contexts, focusing on the role of documentary films in expressing and shaping Indigenous identity. By offering a critical dialogue between global Indigenous theories and Chinese ethnic studies, this

chapter seeks to deepen the understanding of the identity dilemmas faced by Northeast China's ethnic minorities and contribute to the broader discourse on cultural resilience and adaptation in a globalized world.

Chapter three investigates the application of Indigenous methodologies in my cross-cultural research on the ethnic minorities of Northeast China. Drawing on the works of influential Indigenous scholars such as Margaret Kovach, Jo-ann Archibald, Shawn Wilson, and Dorothy Christian, I develop a localized research perspective that respects the knowledge systems and cultural traditions of the region. By applying visual ethnography, oral histories, and reflecting community engagement, this research fosters a collaborative relationship with the Indigenous peoples of Northeast China, empowering local voices and respecting visual sovereignty. Through critical reflection on the challenges of applying Indigenous methodologies, the aim is to contribute to the decolonization of research and foster meaningful cross-cultural understanding. This approach seeks to develop an Indigenous research paradigm that enriches the understanding of Northeast China's ethnic minorities and provides valuable insights for the broader field of Indigenous studies.

In chapter four, by integrating a series of Indigenous theories and methods, I provide an in-depth perspective for exploring the cultural expressions and identity of ethnic minorities in Northeast China. Drawing on the works of Jo-ann Archibald, Shawn Wilson, Dorothy Christian, and the concept of "Indigeneity" as articulated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, I aim to reveal the profound connections between these communities and their lands, as well as the multidimensional nature of their cultural identities. By analysing oral histories, cultural traditions, and visual expressions through the lens of Indigenous theories, I seek to challenge mainstream perceptions and highlight the agency and resilience of these groups in the face of modernization and globalization. Furthermore, I reflect on how these theories have guided my own documentary filmmaking practice, encouraging me to adopt a culturally sensitive, respectful, and ethically responsible approach to representing the lives and stories of the Indigenous

peoples of Northeast China.

Chapter five explores the complex relationship between land, identity, and cultural continuity for the Indigenous peoples of Northeast China. By integrating insights from Indigenous studies, globalization theory, and historical analysis, I aim to uncover how processes of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization have shaped the cultural identities and land relations of these communities. Drawing on the works of scholars such as Appadurai, Scott, and Shao Dan, as well as my own field research in Shifosi Village, I argue that land reform in China has not only altered land ownership and usage but also impacted the cultural identities and social structures of indigenous peoples. Through an examination of the historical transformations of Northeast China, from the Qing Dynasty to the era of globalization, I seek to highlight the resilience and adaptability of indigenous cultures in the face of external pressures and internal changes. This contributes to a deeper understanding of the significance of land for Indigenous identity and cultural continuity, and to emphasise the need for more nuanced approaches to land reform that respect the distinctive histories, cultures, and aspirations of Indigenous peoples.

In chapter six, I engage in deep conversations with visual storytellers and filmmakers from Northeast China to gain a comprehensive understanding of the region's cultural landscape and the relationship between land and identity. By employing the concept of "shared knowledge" and drawing inspiration from Indigenous research methodologies, I aim to present these stories and experiences in a respectful and responsible manner, highlighting their cultural significance and humanistic values. Through an analysis of the interview materials, I explore the diversity of Northeastern culture, the challenges posed by modernity, and the importance of land in shaping cultural identities. I also reflect on the role of visual narratives in preserving and disseminating Northeastern culture and knowledge, emphasising the need for a collaborative and reciprocal approach in supporting ethnic minority communities. My purpose is to bridge the gap between modernity and Indigeneity in Northeast China,

contributing to a deeper understanding of the region's cultural heritage and the complex interplay between land, people, and stories.

Chapter Seven builds on the insights from the previous chapter by shifting focus from oral exchanges to visual media analysis. It explores how ethnographic documentaries in Northeast China serve as vital tools for asserting visual sovereignty and preserving Indigenous cultural continuity amidst social transformation. Rather than centring conversations, this chapter closely analyses selected documentary works, such as Gu Tao's *Aoluguya* series and Liu Yujia's *the Pale View of Hills*, to uncover how visual storytelling constructs, challenges, and negotiates Indigenous identity in the context of modernisation and industrialization. Employing Indigenous film theory and the concept of visual sovereignty as defined by Christian (2017), this chapter investigates how aesthetics, authorship, and cultural ethics shape the representation of minority communities on screen. It also reflects on the author's own documentary *Twilight Over the Silent Hill*, demonstrating how Indigenous research principles, including Joann Archibald's "Storywork," inform the creative process.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Chapter Overview

This chapter builds on the foundational discussions regarding cultural identity in the introduction and expands on how ethnic minorities in Northeast China negotiate their identities within the dual forces of globalization and nation-state dynamics. I explore the identity dilemmas and reconstruction paths of ethnic minorities in Northeast China within the context of contemporary globalization. The rise of the global Indigenous rights movement offers new perspectives for understanding Chinese ethnic minorities. However, global Indigenous theories cannot be directly applied to China due to its distinctive historical and political context. The core question is: How do ethnic minorities in Northeast China negotiate and reshape their identities within the dual contexts of globalization and the nation-state? To address this question, I integrate global Indigenous theories with Chinese ethnic theories and analyse documentaries about these ethnic minorities.

I outline the global conceptualization of Indigeneity, highlighting the complex relationships among Indigenous identity, cultural heritage, and land rights, and the impact of globalization on these concepts. I also explore the Chinese government's measures and limitations in protecting Indigenous rights, focusing on the challenges faced by Northeast China's ethnic minorities in reshaping their cultural and land connections.

This study argues that integrating global Indigenous perspectives with Chinese ethnic minority studies enhances the understanding of Chinese ethnic issues and enriches global Indigenous discourse. By analysing how Indigenous films in Northeast China reflect and shape ethnic minorities' cultural identities, I explore how cross-cultural

theoretical dialogue provides new insights into the complexities of identity negotiation in the context of globalization. This argument is developed through three main points: Indigenous theories offer new frameworks for understanding the experiences of Chinese ethnic minorities, their application in the Chinese context promotes localization and diversification, and the analysis of Indigenous films reveals the power of visual narratives in expressing cultural identities. By facilitating a dialogue between Chinese ethnic and global Indigenous theories, this research aims to contribute to a deeper, more nuanced understanding of contemporary Indigenous studies.

Conceptualizing Indigeneity: Global Perspectives and Literary Evolution

The rise of Indigenous studies globally can be traced back to the 1980s. The concept of Indigenous as a classification typically refers to the original inhabitants of a specific geographical area (Virtanen et al., 2021, Lupien, 2020, Lightfoot, 2016). International non-governmental organizations have promoted the global spread of the concept of Indigeneity by advocating for the rights and interests of Indigenous peoples worldwide (Niezen, 2003, Garrouste, 2003). Initially, this concept gained attention in discussions of citizenship and national identity in “white settler” countries like Australia and North America. In these regions, descendants of pre-European colonization inhabitants began to self-identify as “First Nations” and assert original claims to ancestral lands and cultural rights in political disputes over natural resources and civil rights (Merlan, 2009, pp. 303-333). The adoption of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007 further established the global significance of Indigeneity.

In response, academia has started to explore the revival and development of Indigenous cultures from diverse perspectives. Taiwanese scholars Chen Chih-fan and

Chiu Kuei-fen's analysis of the developmental stages of Taiwanese Indigenous literature provides a useful reference for understanding the situation of Northeast China's ethnic minority cultures in the modern context. They note that Taiwanese Indigenous literature has shifted from emphasising "Indigeneity" to incorporating "cosmopolitanism." Facing rapid changes in the cultural production and consumption environment, 21st-century Taiwanese Indigenous writers focus more on reshaping cultural traditions through new narrative forms rather than simply "De-Sinicizing" (Chih-fan and Kuei-fen, 2021, p. 53-69). This trend suggests that Northeast China's ethnic minority cultures also face the challenge of seeking a balance between preservation and innovation.

In this context, international Indigenous studies provide valuable theoretical resources for researching the cultures of ethnic minorities in Northeast China. Scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Shawn Wilson, Margaret Kovach, and Dorothy Christian offer diverse perspectives on Indigenous knowledge systems, guiding my research. Smith (2012), in *Decolonizing Methodologies Research and Indigenous People*, critiques Western colonial representations of Indigenous peoples and emphasises decolonizing research methods, prompting me to move beyond mainstream discourse and prioritize the voices of Northeast Indigenous peoples. Wilson (2020), in *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*, stresses the interconnectedness of all things and the ethical responsibility of relational research, which influenced my approach to fieldwork by prioritizing knowledge sovereignty and reciprocal exchange. Kovach (2021), in *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Context*, highlights the need for research to be rooted in tribal cultural contexts, reminding me to develop localized paradigms in the Northeast context while engaging with global theories. Christian (2017), in her doctoral dissertation, explores Indigenous filmmaking methodologies, emphasising the importance of reflecting sacred connections to land and ancestors. Her insights are critical for analysing Northeast Indigenous documentaries, as they highlight the need for authentic storytelling that embodies relational responsibilities and land-based ethics.

In dialogue with international Indigenous theories, I established the core questions and methodological direction of this research. As Wilson and Stewart noted (2008), defining “Indigenous media” and “Indigeneity” in the postmodern global era is complex, involving cultural groups’ claims to ancestral lands, autonomy, and control over identity and traditional knowledge. Indigenous media, however, is not just about ownership or control; it is a way for Indigenous peoples to assert cultural sovereignty, reclaim narratives, and challenge misrepresentations (Barker, 2005). It plays a vital role in transmitting knowledge, cultural values, and identity on Indigenous terms (Mantiri and McCann, 2024, pp. 129-138). This perspective prompted me to critically reassess mainstream depictions of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, aiming to reflect the complexity of Indigenous cultures through both representation and ethical engagement with their knowledge systems and cultural sovereignty.

Indigeneity and Ethnic Minorities in Northeast China: Intersections and Complexities

The terms Indigeneity and ethnic minority carry distinct meanings, shaping the ways in which different groups articulate their cultural identity and historical claims.

Indigenous peoples are generally defined as groups with deep historical and spiritual ties to specific lands, predating modern nation-states. Their identities are often shaped by histories of colonization, dispossession, and forced assimilation, and they typically assert claims to land sovereignty and self-determination as central to their survival. In contrast, ethnic minorities are groups that exist as a demographic minority within a nation or region, distinguished by their cultural, linguistic, or religious traits. While they often seek equal citizenship rights and cultural protection, their claims do not necessarily involve land sovereignty or self-governance (Kymlicka, 2020).

In China, the government does not recognize the term Indigenous in its official

discourse. Instead, all non-Han ethnic groups are classified under the state-sanctioned category of ethnic minorities (Gladney, 1998). This classification system, formalized during the 1950s Ethnic Identification Project, does not distinguish between groups that meet international criteria for Indigeneity and those whose distinctiveness is primarily cultural or linguistic. The state narrative emphasises national unity and ethnic diversity, framing all recognized minority groups as part of the broader Chinese identity rather than as communities with distinct historical and territorial claims (Yeh et al., 2015).

Despite the absence of official recognition, certain ethnic groups in Northeast China align more closely with global definitions of Indigeneity due to their historical ties to the land, traditional subsistence practices, and experiences of state-imposed assimilation policies (Bulag, 2002). According to Aurore Dumont, sedentarization policies reshaped the Reindeer Evenki's social structure, particularly in land use, power relations, and economic models (Dumont, 2015, pp. 77-97). Forced relocations in 1957, 1965, and 2003 aimed to settle the Evenki permanently and integrate reindeer herding into state modernization. These policies redefined land management and weakened traditional hunter-herder leadership structures that governed migration routes and resource allocation (Williams, 2002). This pattern closely mirrors the experiences of Indigenous communities globally, who have faced displacement due to state-driven modernization and resource extraction.

The Sibe present a compelling case of Indigeneity shaped by displacement. In 1764, the Qing government forcibly relocated a significant portion of the Sibe population from Northeast China to Xinjiang, severing them from their ancestral lands. Despite this displacement, Sibe communities in both Northeast China and Xinjiang have retained their language, cultural identity, and historical consciousness, demonstrating a form of Indigeneity that persists beyond territorial continuity (Oidtmann, 2014, pp. 49-87). The experience of forced migration and cultural survival aligns with broader Indigenous struggles worldwide, where displacement does not erase Indigenous status

but rather reshapes it in response to political and historical pressures.

The case of the Manchu further complicates the distinction between Indigeneity and ethnic minority status. As the ruling ethnic group of the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912), the Manchu initially maintained distinct governance structures, language, and cultural practices. However, following the fall of the Qing, they experienced a rapid transition from imperial rulers to a marginalized ethnic group. In the early 20th century, widespread discrimination led many Manchu individuals to assimilate into Han society, abandoning their language and cultural markers to avoid persecution (Crossley, 1990).

While the Manchu do not fit into the global Indigenous framework due to their historical role as a ruling elite, their subsequent marginalization, cultural erasure, and contemporary revitalization efforts parallel the experiences of many Indigenous communities. The loss of the Manchu language and the subsequent efforts to revive it reflect a broader struggle for cultural survival, mirroring Indigenous language revitalization movements worldwide. The Manchu case challenges rigid categorizations of Indigeneity and illustrates how Indigenous and ethnic minority identities are not static but rather evolve in response to historical and political shifts.

This research examines how documentary filmmaking portrays ethnic identity in Northeast China, particularly in relation to the tension between state-imposed categorizations and self-representation. The official classification of all these groups as ethnic minorities provides certain legal protections, such as language preservation policies and cultural funding, but it also restricts their ability to assert an identity outside of state-defined frameworks.

Indigeneity in China: Historical Perspectives and Contemporary Narratives

The study of Indigeneity in China differs from that in other parts of the world. These differences are evident not only in the retrieval of lost Indigenous cultural heritage and the revival of forgotten cultural practices but also in the reshaping of Indigenous culture through storytelling by Indigenous scholars. As Professor Ma Rong points out:

“We still need to re-understand and summarize China’s traditional ethnic views and the evolution of group identity awareness from the perspectives of historical reflection and cross-cultural comparison. In the development of modern history, China has always been influenced by external ideologies and political inclinations, which is the fundamental difference between the study of Indigeneity in China and other regions”.

(Ma, 2007, pp.12-38)

Ma Rong emphasises the significance of revisiting China’s traditional ethnic views, which are deeply rooted in historical and cultural frameworks that prioritize cultural inclusivity and adaptation over rigid racial or ethnic boundaries. These views are characterized by a cultural integration approach, which perceives ethnic groups not as immutable categories but as fluid entities shaped by processes of cultural exchange, adaptation, and assimilation (Ma, 2004, pp.5-15). The concept of “Hua-Yi distinction¹” (夷夏之辨) served as the primary framework for managing relations between the central Han Chinese polity and peripheral ethnic groups. This approach focused on “transforming the uncivilized” through cultural exchange rather than exclusion, highlighting a dynamic interplay between teaching and learning from non-Han groups (Ma, 2016, pp.198-211). The developmental trajectories of ethnic relations in different areas of China also exhibit distinctive characteristics.

¹ A traditional Chinese worldview that distinguishes between the culturally advanced “Hua” (Chinese or central plains culture) and the culturally less developed “Yi” (non-Han or peripheral groups). This concept emphasises the potential for cultural transformation and integration, as “Yi” groups could adopt “Hua” practices and values through education and cultural exchange, reflecting a dynamic and inclusive approach to ethnic relations in Chinese history (Ma, 2016)

The evolution of ethnic relations and identity awareness in China can be understood through a framework of three historical stages, as outlined by Ma. From the earliest recorded history to the Opium War in 1840, China gradually developed a “unified system” characterized by cultural traditions and identity features. This period is often described as embodying a culturalist view of ethnicity, marked by an inclusive principle of “education without discrimination.” Building on this perspective, Professor Fei Xiaotong has identified this era as the formative stage of the “pluralistic unity of the Chinese nation.” (Ma, 2007, pp.12-38). By integrating these interpretations, we can see how historical narratives of ethnicity and identity have been shaped within the broader context of China’s development.

From the Opium War in 1840 to the establishment of the People’s Republic of China in 1949, Western culture strongly entered China, disrupting the existing Qing dynasty’s ruling system and encouraging some frontier ethnic groups to detach from China. This period represents the crisis of the “pluralistic unity”, which has been reconstructed, although the theoretical guidance and institutional construction have followed Stalin’s Soviet model since 1949.

However, the Northeastern frontier of China, bordering the Korean Peninsula and the Far East, has always been a critical corridor connecting China, Korea, Vladivostok and Sakhalin regions. This area has seen a history of multi-ethnic migration and coexistence, forming a trajectory of ethnic relations development reflected in the three historical stages summarized by Professor Ma Rong.

First Stage: In the early period, Northeast China was a region of intersecting migrations and cohabitation among various groups, developing distinctive regional cultural traditions that were both connected to and distinct from the “Huaxia” culture of the Central Plains. Second Stage: This region became a major area of invasion by Tsarist Russia and Japan, serving as a frontline for various ethnic groups resisting

foreign aggression. Third Stage: After 1949, Northeast China, bordering Korea and Russia, displayed distinctive characteristics in implementing ethnic theories and policies to ensure national security and border stability (Ma, 2007, pp.12-38).

These regional characteristics reveal the complexity and diversity of ethnic relations development in Northeast China's frontier. As emphasised by Professor Ma, understanding these differences requires a cross-cultural comparative research perspective. He states:

“We need to strive to break the monopolistic and mutually isolated boundaries of existing disciplines. Today's social science knowledge system is no longer regional, ideologically divided, or based on isolated civilizational systems but has gradually evolved into a global, transnational, cross-cultural, and interpenetrative knowledge system”.
(Ma, 2007, pp.12-38)

He points out that breaking the monopolistic and isolated boundaries of existing disciplines and promoting a transnational and cross-cultural knowledge system is crucial for understanding ethnic relations in Northeast China's frontier. This perspective is vital for my research, as it emphasises the need for a cross-cultural comparative and multidisciplinary approach when analysing the ethnic relations and identity awareness in the Northeast frontier.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the government chose to use the term “minority nationalities” to define Indigenous peoples. In the 1980s, some Chinese anthropologists and sociologists used "national minority" to refer to these groups, a term reflected in official discourse at the time. This was influenced by the Soviet “nationality theory” and also reflected the Chinese Communist Party's efforts to combine Marxist-Leninist nationality theory with China's realities (Ma, 2013, pp.42-58). However, “ethnic minority” eventually became the mainstream term in

official discourse. This shift partly reflects the government's emphasis on national identity in handling ethnic issues (Chaudhuri, 2022, pp.75-89).

Certain Western Indigenous researchers have raised doubts about this decision. Western academic discourse on China's ethnic minorities has developed a rich theoretical framework that critically examines the power dynamics and cultural politics in China's handling of ethnic issues. Gladney argues that the Chinese state actively constructs ethnic minorities as cultural "others" to reinforce a cohesive national identity centered on the Han majority (Gladney, 1994). He highlights how the state employs stereotypes of "authentic" ethnic culture—such as Islamic practices or traditional dress—as a tool to both celebrate diversity and marginalize these groups within the national framework. This dynamic of representation and power becomes particularly evident in the realm of cultural politics. Schein argues that the Han majority's portrayal of minorities as primitive and colorful reflects a continuation of colonial logic within China's borders (Schein, 2000). She examines how the Miao people are depicted in state-sponsored media and cultural tourism, often through hyper-feminized and exoticized images that serve to entertain and reassure the Han audience of their cultural superiority. This phenomenon, according to Schein, is not merely a reflection of cultural differences but a deliberate strategy to maintain a hierarchical national order.

In the context of Northeast China, similar dynamics can be observed in the portrayal of the Manchu, Sibe, and Evenki peoples. Traditional clothing, rituals, and festivals are often highlighted in government narratives to construct a romanticized image of these communities, while their contemporary struggles with industrialization, land loss, and cultural assimilation are overlooked. Schein's insights compel us to question how state narratives shape both internal and external perceptions of Northeast minorities, as well as the extent to which these groups can reclaim their narratives through Indigenous visual storytelling.

Stevan Harrell's concept of "civilizing projects" provides another critical lens for understanding China's approach to ethnic minorities. He argues that the state's modernization efforts often function as civilizing missions that aim to transform minority groups according to Han-centric standards of development (Harrell, 1995). Harrell uses this concept to describe how the Chinese government's initiatives aim to homogenize cultural diversity under the umbrella of national unity. For Northeast China, policies promoting large-scale forestry and mining projects have not only displaced these communities from their ancestral lands but also disrupted their traditional hunting and reindeer-herding practices. Harrell's work highlights the contradictions in state narratives that claim to preserve minority cultures while implementing policies that undermine their cultural and ecological foundations.

This perspective is echoed in Ralph Litzinger's research, which examines how national belonging is negotiated and contested in minority regions. Litzinger's research explores how national belonging is negotiated and contested within the tensions between state policies and local identities. He critiques the state's integration policies for disregarding aspirations for cultural autonomy and selectively curating cultural heritage to present ethnic regions as spectacles that align with national narratives of unity and progress. (Litzinger, 2000). Additionally, he examines the environmental and social consequences of such projects, arguing that they often prioritize economic objectives over the well-being of local communities. The commodification of ethnic cultures in Northeast China is evident in the state's promotion of tourism in areas such as Inner Mongolia and the Greater Khingan Mountains. Litzinger's work underscores the need to critically analyse how these practices affect the cultural and ecological sustainability of Indigenous groups. His research also raises questions about the potential for Indigenous media, such as ethnographic documentaries, to challenge these narratives and offer more authentic representations of minority experiences.

Rudolph Ryser argues (2021) that the Chinese Communist Party's oppression of

minority nationalities affects their ability to protect their culture and land, claiming that the government implements accelerated assimilation policies to control these groups. Such views are somewhat representative in Western academia, which often posits that the Chinese government exerts assimilation pressure on minority nationalities.

“...they mainly do this to gain international recognition of their authority. But they also recognize that these populations are reluctant to assimilate. So, they have these 55 different ethnicities, and for these people, maintaining a relationship with the Han becomes an extremely difficult role. Like many countries led by different peoples, the Communist Party is interested in assimilation, meaning transforming the population into Han. This is largely related to territorial control and occupation” (Ryser, 2021).

This critique highlights Western scholars’ concerns about China’s ethnic policies, particularly regarding assimilation and territorial control. While influential in Western academia, these views require comprehensive analysis within China’s historical and social context to fully understand China’s ethnic policies. Despite changes in official discourse, China’s constitution and related laws clearly affirm the equal status and legal rights of minority nationalities (Brady, 2012, pp. 3-9). China has made certain achievements in protecting minority rights but also faces challenges. As a unified multi-ethnic country, China still needs to improve the protection of ethnic minority rights, while maintaining national unity and ethnic solidarity as consistent principles (Ma, 2013, pp.42-58). The evolution of Chinese ethnic discourse reflects the government’s efforts to balance national and ethnic identities, achieving ethnic equality and national unity. Although some Western scholars criticize China’s ethnic policies, these perspectives must be understood within China’s specific historical context.

Geographer Emily T. Yeh (2007) argues that the Chinese government typically views Indigenous issues as irrelevant to itself, as it has long claimed that all citizens of the state are equal locals. Consequently, China's minority nationalities rarely appear in international Indigenous discussions, as both Han and non-Han groups are considered Indigenous to mainland China. Although there is a lack of consensus in academia regarding the presence of Indigenous consciousness in contemporary China, the country has a long history of interacting with Indigenous populations from the earliest recorded history to the present. The relative absence of Indigenous consciousness in modern China should not be seen as a lack of historical interaction between the state and Indigenous peoples, nor as a sign of a lack of Indigenous cultural awareness among minority groups today.

The Historical Construction of Northeast China's Regional Identity

The complex history of identity shifts in Northeast China, influenced by various geopolitical factors, provides crucial context for understanding the current issues of identity in the region and their significance in Indigenous research. Historically, this region has undergone numerous shifts in identity and belonging, influenced by several key factors: the reshaping of national and ethnic boundaries during the Sino-Japanese struggle over Northeast China (Duara, 2009, O'Dwyer, 2020); the transition from the Qing dynasty's "Closed Northeast" policy (封禁东北) during the Jiaqing era (嘉庆, 1796–1820) to the "Northeast Reclamation" starting in the Tongzhi era (同治, 1862–1874), followed by Japanese colonial rule. This period also included brief occupations by Japan and the Soviet Union. Chiasson notes that late Qing administrative reforms in the Northeast largely reflected the Qing government, Tsarist Russia, and the Japanese Empire's attempts to establish control over the region through economic, military, and administrative means (Chiasson, 2014, p.161). The struggle between Japan and Russia for sovereignty over the Northeast not only highlighted the region's geopolitical significance but also contributed to the ongoing complexity of identity issues in the

area (Zatsepine, 2014). These historical transformations in Northeast China's territorial concepts and governance structures have had a lasting impact on the region's identity issues, making it a particularly relevant and compelling case study for Indigenous studies research.

During the late Qing dynasty, Northeast China evolved from the traditional homeland of the Manchu people into a border region of China, closely linked to the formation of the Chinese national identity. Shao Dan notes, "The disintegration of the concept of the Northeast as the Manchu homeland began in the late Qing, coinciding with the formation of the Chinese national identity" (Shao, 2011, p. 286). As more Manchu rulers and Bannermen² began to see Beijing as their home, the Northeast gradually became a place of exile, reflecting the shift from the "Manchu Empire" to the "Northeast region of the Republic."

Meanwhile, the Sino-Japanese struggle over the Northeast reshaped the region's national and ethnic boundaries. After Japan occupied the Northeast, it promoted the ideal of "Republic of Five Race³," but in practice, Japanese colonizers dominated, and Manchu identity remained marginalized. The existence of the puppet state of Manchukuo further fuelled Chinese suspicions about the loyalty of the Manchu people (Shao, 2011, p.113). The Manchurian Incident (also known as the Mukden

² Bannermen refers to members of the Eight Banners, which were administrative and military divisions under the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) in China. The Eight Banners were established by the Manchu people before they conquered China. Bannermen included not only Manchus but also Mongols and Han Chinese who were integrated into the banner system. (Elliott, 2001, pp. 39-40, Crossley, 2000, p.285)

³ Republic of Five Race was a concept promoted by Japan during its occupation of Manchuria, advocating for peaceful coexistence among five ethnic groups: the Han, Manchu, Mongolian, Korean, and Japanese. This slogan was one of the official policies of the puppet state of Manchukuo, intended to mask Japan's colonial ambitions by presenting its control over Manchuria as a vision of an ideal, harmonious multi-ethnic state. Japan sought to use this policy to win over local ethnic groups by projecting a positive image of coexistence and unity. (Duara, 2003, pp. 58-59, Ge, 2018, p. 69)

Incident) occurred on September 18, 1931, when Japanese military personnel staged an explosion on the South Manchuria Railway near Mukden (present-day Shenyang), falsely blaming Chinese forces. This event served as a pretext for Japan to launch a full-scale invasion of Northeast China, leading to the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo in 1932. As O'Dwyer (2020) points out that incident marked a turning point in Japan's regional strategy, reshaping its ideological and physical boundaries in Asia. Through Manchukuo, Japan sought to cloak its colonial ambitions under the rhetoric of "national self-determination," attempting to legitimize its militaristic expansion (Shao, 2011, p.110). This shift from appeasement to aggression altered Japan's colonial policies and profoundly impacted the identity and territorial belonging of Northeast China.

After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Chinese Communist Party implemented a series of policies aimed at consolidating national unity and addressing ethnic relations. During the Mao era (1949–1976), the Chinese Communist Party undertook large-scale ethnic identification campaigns (民族识别工作) to classify and recognize minority groups (Mackerras, 2003). In 1952, the Manchu were officially recognized as one of the ethnic minorities of China. Despite Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai's belief that the Manchu had largely assimilated into Han culture, all former Banner people and their descendants, regardless of their social or cultural background, were allowed to reclaim Manchu identity (Shao, 2011, p. 293). This recognition laid the groundwork for further institutional support for the Manchu, including the establishment of ethnic autonomous regions. For example, the Chinese Communist Party established Xinbin Manchu Autonomous County in 1985, following years of local petitions and advocacy.

Between 1949 and 1976, the Northeast played a critical role in China's socialist industrialization. The region, benefiting from the industrial legacy of the Japanese and Soviet Union, became a key hub for heavy industries such as steel and coal production. These developments not only reshaped the economic structure of the

Northeast but also influenced the cultural and social dynamics of ethnic minorities in the region, as they were increasingly integrated into the socialist framework.

By the early 1980s, during the initial years of China's reform and opening-up period, Northeast China emerged as a key economic focal point. The new government inherited the industrial legacy of the Mao era and the Japanese occupation while exercising its power to reclassify border populations and redefine ethnic identities. These policies, including the elevation of the Manchu's status through the establishment of autonomous counties, not only reshaped the ethnic identity of minorities in Northeast China but also provided a new social foundation for the region's modernization.

Throughout modern history, the interplay of sovereignty disputes, colonization, and ethnic policies has collectively shaped the complex territorial affiliations and identity constructs of Northeast China. As Prasenjit Duara states, Manchuria was a land fraught with contradictions, where it was difficult to distinguish between imperialism and nationalism, modernity and tradition, frontier and hinterland (Duara, 2003). The multifaceted construction of Northeast identity reflects the region's status and complex characteristics across different historical periods.

Critique and Reconstruction: Reflections on Chinese Ethnic Minority Studies

Underexplored aspects remain in Chinese academia's study of minority groups, particularly regarding the distinctive historical context of Northeast China. Research often fails to address the impacts of Japanese colonialism and socialist modernization on the identities of the Manchu, Sibe, Evenki, and Oroqen peoples. It also tends to overlook how these groups navigate complex processes of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization. In this context, Ma Rong's (2004) assertion that "the development

of race and ethnic relations in contemporary societies increasingly draws the focus of sociologists, making it a core research field in sociology”. This perspective highlights the centrality of ethnic relations in understanding broader societal dynamics, aligning with my aim to critically examine how state policies and minority identity-building interact. By engaging with Ma’s ideas, I move beyond the constraints of traditional ethnographic approaches and explore the deeper tensions between state-driven narratives and minority self-representation.

Nationalism and ethnic policies play a critical role in shaping ethnic relations, particularly in a multicultural country such as China. In this context, the careful handling of ethnicity is crucial to avoiding division and fostering unity. Ma Rong argues that nationalism should be a tool “used to enhance the internal unity of the country rather than to cause division” (Ma, 2013, pp.42-58). He emphasises that the concept of ethnicity needs to be applied with caution to prevent misleading policymaking. Furthermore, Ma highlights that the idea of “transborder ethnic groups” requires deeper analysis, as it often overlooks the complexities of modern nation-state boundaries and national identity, introducing potential political risks (Ma, 2016, pp.198-211). This underscores the fact that the state’s classification of minorities is not just an academic exercise, but part of a broader effort to integrate minorities into the national political framework.

However, Ma’s perspective also has limitations. While he recognizes the “othering” of minorities in Chinese official ethnic discourse, he does not sufficiently address the “coloniality” of this discourse system. The state’s identification and management of ethnic groups can alter minorities’ original community identities and restrict their self-expression to some extent (Gladney, 1997, pp.50-54). Although Ma’s research touches on these issues, it lacks a systematic analysis of the power relations and cultural politics involved in the construction of official ethnic discourse using postcolonial theory.

The process of ethnic identity construction among minority groups often involves a dynamic interplay between state discourse and local agency. Using the Qiang people of Sichuan as an example, it becomes clear that minority scholars exercise agency in interpreting and appropriating official ethnic discourse. Zhang Yansuo's (2021) study reveals how Qiang scholars assert their Indigeneity through textual creation, discourse practices, and cultural entrepreneurship, embedding Qiang history within the broader narrative of the multi-ethnic Chinese nation. By positioning the Qiang as one of the ancestors of the Chinese nation, these scholars challenge the Han-centric narrative and emphasize the multicultural origins of Chinese history. However, Zhang's analysis does not fully address the extent to which this creative interpretation is shaped by state ideological constraints. While Qiang scholars reframe ethnic myths and stress their importance in Chinese history, they remain largely bound by the official framework of "pluralistic unity" emphasising the Qiang's inseparable connection to the Chinese nation rather than advocating for an independent ethnic identity. This reflects the subtle balance between local agency and state discourse in ethnic identity construction.

Deterritorialization, Globalization, and Northeast China: A Critical Reflection from an Indigenous Perspective

Chinese academia has limited engagement with Indigenous theories, yet the concept of Indigenous identity is continuously constructed through interactions with the state and globalization (Forte, 2010), providing new perspectives for understanding the situation of China's ethnic minorities. In this globalized context, the terms "Indigeneity" and "Deterritorialization" become particularly significant (Christian, 2017, p.50). These terms directly address the relationship between Indigenous peoples and their lands. "Indigeneity" typically appears in discussions about Indigenous cultural identity, while "Deterritorialization" is often linked to the erasure of national borders and the movement of populations, whether voluntary or involuntary.

Since Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari first introduced the concept of “Deterritorialization” in their 1972 work *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972), where they explored the psychological dimensions of space and place, the term has been appropriated in cultural anthropology and redefined within the context of globalization. Appadurai, in *Modernity at Large* (1996), introduces the concept of Deterritorialization, arguing that in the globalized world, culture becomes decoupled from specific locales, leading to instability in cultural identity. According to Appadurai (1996), globalization fosters the movement of populations and cultural flows that no longer rely on geographical boundaries, thereby unsettling traditional cultural identities. While his theory has been influential in understanding migration and cultural shifts, it tends to oversimplify the deep connections between Indigenous peoples and their lands. In particular, Appadurai underestimates the importance of land to Indigenous identity and overlooks the exploitative impact of global capitalism on Indigenous territories (Christian, 2017, pp.95-98).

Shao Dan’s (2011) research provides a critical counterpoint to Appadurai’s theory by examining the historical case of the Manchu. In her book *Remote Homeland, Recovered Borderland: Manchus, Manchoukuo, and Manchuria*, Shao explores how the Manchu identity has been redefined throughout different historical periods, demonstrating a continuous connection to their land. Despite the Manchu’s transformation from rulers to a marginalized minority, their cultural identity has retained historical continuity, challenging the notion that globalization necessarily serves ties between people and place. Shao’s work highlights how, even in the face of state policies and modern pressures, the Manchu people have reinterpreted their relationship with both the state and their homeland, underscoring Indigenous agency in the globalization process.

Building on Shao Dan’s findings, I critique Appadurai’s oversimplification of cultural Deterritorialization by showing that, in the case of the Manchu, globalization has not

entirely dissolved their connection to land. For instance, during the Japanese occupation of Manchukuo, efforts were made to culturally assimilate the Manchu, weakening their connection to traditional territories. However, as Shao reveals, the Manchu people maintained their cultural identity and historical narrative, offering a more complex view of how Indigenous identities evolve (Shao, 2011, p.107). This case demonstrates that Indigenous cultures can retain their links to land even as they adapt to modern and global forces.

Building on this critique, Arif Dirlik's analysis of globalization provides an even deeper examination of the political and economic structures underlying these processes. He argues that contemporary discussions of cultural difference often neglect the role of economic and political power in generating inequality, particularly in relation to Indigenous land (Dirlik, 2002, pp.16-39). Dirlik's critique aligns with Md Nazmul Hasan Chowdhury's condemnation of Appadurai's Deterritorialization theory, highlighting how global capitalism exploits Indigenous lands while ignoring Indigenous agency (Chowdhury, 2005). By focusing on the economic dimensions of globalization, Dirlik exposes the uneven power dynamics that Appadurai's framework overlooks.

Dirlik's critiques challenge Appadurai's theory of Deterritorialization and emphasise the agency of Indigenous peoples in the face of globalization. The historical case of the Manchu, as examined by Shao, illustrates the complexity and fluidity of Indigenous identity, while Dirlik's critique underscores the importance of considering political and economic structures in discussions of cultural change. Together, these perspectives provide a more nuanced understanding of how Indigenous peoples negotiate their identity and maintain connections to land, even within the forces of globalization.

Visual Anthropology and Indigenous Filmmaking: Global Practices

and Indigenous Explorations

Anthropology and film both emerged in the early 20th century, and their continuous interplay has led to the development of visual anthropology, a distinctive field that explores the role of visual media in cultural research, ethical issues in knowledge production, and methodological innovations (Lajoux, 2003, MacDougall, 1998, Gray, 2010). Meanwhile, the rise of global Indigenous movements has sparked a strong desire among Indigenous communities to use visual media for cultural representation and political advocacy (Gauthier, 2008). This gave birth to Indigenous filmmaking, which engages in a dynamic cultural dialogue with mainstream cinema.

Anthropologist David MacDougall's work provides crucial theoretical perspectives for understanding Indigenous filmmaking. In *Transcultural Cinema*, he points out that while ethnographic film can bridge cultural gaps, it must also be wary of the power imbalances in anthropological knowledge production (MacDougall, 1998). He further argues that film not only conveys the outward appearance of its subjects but also evokes cultural reflection through sensory and bodily engagement (MacDougall, 2005). In line with MacDougall's participatory approach, Indigenous filmmakers began to tell their own stories, incorporating their aesthetic and narrative traditions. Dorothy Christian emphasises that exemplary Indigenous films must be deeply rooted in their culture, showcasing sacred connections to land and ancestors and reflecting the Indigenous spirit (Christian, 2017, p.220).

Chinese independent documentary filmmaker Gu Tao embodies this approach in his work. Through poetic imagery and a languid pace, Gu Tao captures the confusion and resilience of Evenki hunters as they face the pressures of modernization, portraying their deep emotional ties to the land (Liu, 2017, pp.64-68). Gu Tao's long-term immersion in the Evenki community and the trust he built with the hunters exemplify a participatory documentary method that integrates visual creation with Indigenous spirit and cultural reflection. This approach demonstrates respect for the land and

ancestors while authentically reflecting the state of cultural identity amid the collision with modern life.

Chinese ethnic minority films have often fallen into the trap of exoticizing and stereotyping minority cultures, reinforcing a simplistic binary between “us” and “them” This problematic representation underscores the urgent need for authentic Indigenous self-expression and self-representation in cinema. Benjamin D. Shaffer critiques this tendency, noting that Chinese minority films frequently romanticize and stereotype these communities (Shaffer, 2007). His observation resonates with Christian’s criticism of mainstream films misrepresenting Indigenous cultures. Similarly, Li Xiaoni, through the lenses of geography, history, and culture, exposes how contemporary media often distorts Northeast culture by simplifying and vulgarizing its portrayal (Li, 2023, pp.149-156). In contrast, Gu Tao rejects these superficial depictions, embedding their work in local contexts and using poetic imagery to capture the deeper essence of Northeast culture. Their films counter the shallow narratives of mass media, embodying the cultural consistency principle and offering a more authentic representation.

Risu Na summarizes the narrative characteristics of Chinese minority films, such as highlighting cultural features of minorities, rich and colourful folk imagery, and focusing on the daily lives of ordinary people (Na and Na, 2022, pp.73-77). These features resonate with MacDougall’s reflective practice and Rouch’s (2003) participatory filmmaking, reaffirming the cultural value of Indigenous filmmaking.

Visual Sovereignty and the Relationship Between Land and Identity in Documentaries of Northeast China’s Ethnic Minorities

Visual sovereignty is a critical concept closely tied to Indigenous filmmaking. Jolene Rickard first introduced this idea, asserting that visual sovereignty means Indigenous peoples have the right to control their own image representations and, through this

control, reaffirm their cultural identity (Rickard, 1995, pp.50–59). Michelle Raheja further elaborated on the importance of visual sovereignty, arguing that it challenges mainstream media's stereotypical and colonial representations of Indigenous communities, providing a platform for Indigenous voices (Raheja, 2010). Dorothy Christian emphasises that visual sovereignty is deeply rooted in the land, stories, and cultural norms of Indigenous communities (Christian, 2017, p.220).

The relationship between land and place is essential for understanding how visual sovereignty operates in these Indigenous contexts. In Indigenous studies, "land" refers to a broader concept that encompasses both physical and spiritual dimensions, serving as a living entity that sustains life, culture, and identity (LaDuke, 1999). It carries deep spiritual and ancestral significance, enabling Indigenous life and cultural practices through its generative power (Coulthard, 2014). As Goeman Mishuana points out, Indigenous relationships with land are not static; they are constantly negotiated and redefined through history, storytelling, and ongoing practices of resistance and survival (Mishuana, 2015, p.74).

In contrast, "place" refers to a more localized and relational concept. Place is imbued with personal and communal meaning, shaped by the stories, memories, and interactions that occur within it. Mishuana (2015) argues that place-making involves the creation of meaning through language, story, and engagement with specific environments, transforming land from a mere geographical entity into a lived and experienced space. In this way, place becomes culturally and emotionally embedded, a site where relationships with land are enacted and reaffirmed. For example, Cristina Bacchilega describes Indigenous lands as "storied places," spaces where cultural memory and history are activated in the present through narrative and ritual (Bacchilega, 2007). This transformation of land into place is essential for understanding Indigenous knowledge systems, as place embodies the lived experiences and spiritual connections of Indigenous peoples.

The distinction between land and place also carries political implications. Land, as a broad and encompassing concept, has been at the center of colonial dispossession and resistance. The violent expropriation of Indigenous lands by colonial powers disrupted not only physical occupation but also the spiritual and cultural systems that were intertwined with the land (Blackhawk, 2008). Place, on the other hand, focuses on how Indigenous communities continue to maintain and recreate connections with land, even in contexts of displacement or diaspora. Thus, while land is foundational to Indigenous identity and sovereignty, place reflects the ongoing, active process of meaning-making and cultural survival in relation to specific landscapes.

In my research of documentaries about Northeast China's ethnic minorities, the concept of visual sovereignty holds significant theoretical and practical importance. As Raheja notes, visual sovereignty is directly related to how Indigenous peoples represent themselves through visual narratives (Raheja, 2010, p.194). Gu Tao illustrate the connection between visual sovereignty and the ties to land and identity is evident. Christian emphasises that Indigenous aesthetics are deeply embedded in responsibilities connected to the land, family/clan, community, and tribe/nation (Christian, 2017, p.123). Through the practice of visual sovereignty, Northeast China's ethnic minority documentaries not only defend their right to cultural expression but also reaffirm the central role of land in shaping Indigenous identity. This visual practice challenges mainstream representations and provides new perspectives for understanding the complex relationships between land, identity, and cultural expression.

Gu Tao's documentary *Lost Mountain* explores the cultural choices of the younger generation of Oroqen people, highlighting a critical aspect of cultural fluidity and identity negotiation in the context of globalization. The transition from traditional hunting to settled life, driven by the state's ecological migration policy, marks a significant shift for this historically nomadic community. This policy, implemented by the Chinese government since the early 2000s, aims to relocate populations from

ecologically fragile areas to protect the environment and promote sustainable development. For the Oroqen, it meant abandoning their ancestral forests and hunting grounds, fundamentally altering their way of life. Rather than portraying a simple dichotomy between tradition and modernity, *Lost Mountain* highlights the continuity of traditional spirit through adaptation. This is exemplified by the transformation of horseback archery into contemporary motocross, reflecting the Oroqen's efforts to maintain their ethnic identity despite lifestyle changes. By incorporating motocross as a new form of cultural expression, the community preserves its connection to themes of speed, adventure, and conquest. This resonates with Raheja's argument that Indigenous films should depict not just tradition but also the complexities of contemporary Indigenous life (Raheja, 2011, p.180, p.208). Gu Tao effectively captures the Oroqen's resilience and creativity as they navigate environmental changes, demonstrating the adaptability of ethnic minority cultures in the face of modernization and national policies.



Figure 2 *Lost Mountain*, Documentary, Gu Tao, 2014

Liu Yujia's *Pale View of Hills* (远山淡景, 2018) examines the tension between tradition and modernity through the character of the Kucha Princess. Liu Yujia, a Han Chinese filmmaker, brings an outsider's perspective to this story, exploring themes of cultural

preservation and identity negotiation in the context of modern China. The Kucha Princess, portrayed as the last princess of her lineage and a representative of the Uyghur ethnic group, embodies the complex interplay between fading traditions and contemporary influences. Rather than portraying the Princess solely as a symbol of tradition or as fully integrated into modern urban life, the film captures her as navigating and oscillating between these two worlds. As the last princess of her lineage, she represents the fading remnants of local tradition. Her daily routines—such as wearing traditional attire while greeting tourists at the palace—evoke the decline of Indigenous culture, positioning her as a fragile guardian of a disappearing heritage.

The film delves deeper into her lived reality by juxtaposing her ceremonial role as a princess greeting tourists with the mundane aspects of her daily life, such as cleaning toilets. This portrayal transcends her symbolic function as a guardian of fading traditions, revealing her as an individual navigating a dual existence. Through the contrast between the quiet solitude of her personal living space and the bustling, curated environment of the palace, the film highlights the tension between private struggles and public performance. Additionally, by employing Chantal Akerman-inspired long takes, the film patiently observes her routines, allowing the complexity of her lived reality to emerge in subtle, profound ways

While Appadurai's theory on the production of Indigeneity offers valuable insight into this dynamic, it has limitations in the context of China. Appadurai argues that Indigeneity is not a fixed or inherent quality, but rather a process continuously produced through global flows and cultural interactions (Appadurai, 1996, p.48). As I have previously argued, his emphasis on globalization overlooks the significant role of the state in shaping Indigenous identities, particularly in Chinese contexts. In the case of the Kucha Princess, her cultural identity is not solely a product of globalization but is also regulated by state policies that control how ethnic minority cultures are displayed, often through tourism and cultural heritage programs. This

state intervention plays a central role in shaping how her identity is represented and consumed, a factor that Appadurai's framework does not fully account for.

These identities face the pressure of reconstruction in modern urban life but also demonstrate resilience. The director, with keen insight and poetic touch, captures the princess's oscillation between tradition and modernity. Close-up details of 'Indigeneity' symbols, such as room decorations and clothing, reveal the individual's attachment to Indigenous traditions. The juxtaposition of the princess with the urban landscape reminds us that 'Indigeneity' is always in a dynamic process of production.

If *Lost Mountain* showcases how the Oroqen people sustain and transform traditional culture in contemporary contexts through activities like motorcycling, then *Pale View of Hills* (远山淡景, 2018) depicts the nuanced process of individual negotiation of identity between tradition and modernity. Under Liu Yujia's lens, the Princess of Kucha is neither a simple guardian of tradition nor an outsider to urban life, but rather someone who participates in the production of Indigeneity in her own way. In her seemingly silent daily life, she reaffirms and defends her cultural identity.

Both films focus on the transformation of Indigenous cultural identity in the context of globalization, reflecting Christian's assertion that Indigenous films should "be rooted in national culture, with our visual aesthetics manifested in the images of our daily activities" (Christian, 2017, pp.290-291). The attentive presentation of cultural details, such as the Oroqen people's clothing and the Princess of Kucha's room decorations, illustrates cultural coherence (Christian, 2017, pp.255). The enthusiasm of young people for motorcycles and billiards reflects the integration of modern consumerist culture. By telling their own stories, ethnic minority films not only showcase cultural confidence but also enrich the diversity of Chinese culture, contributing to the construction of the Chinese national community.

These films illustrate how Indigenous filmmakers utilize visual narratives to

reinterpret and reconstruct national identity, showcasing their efforts to preserve cultural continuity and distinctiveness. This process itself embodies the significance of “visual sovereignty.” (Rickard, 2011, Raheja, 2010) By telling their own stories, Indigenous films defend the right to cultural expression, challenging the long-standing power imbalance in cultural representation.

The case studies of the Oroqen people and the Kucha Princess present a vivid picture of ethnic minority cultures as they continue and transform within a modern context. This process reflects the practical power of the theory of ethnic groups with Chinese characteristics, which emphasises the “pluralistic unity” of the Chinese nation. This theory, rooted in the framework of national unity and ethnic diversity, seeks to balance the preservation of minority cultures with the broader goals of modernization and national rejuvenation. It promotes policies that support cultural protection, economic development, and regional autonomy, ensuring that minority identities are preserved while contributing to the collective identity of the Chinese nation.

Cultural Continuity and Identity Reconstruction from an Indigenous Perspective: Cultural Identity of Ethnic Minorities in Northeast China in the Context of Globalization

The core concept of “Indigeneity” emphasises the profound connection between Indigenous peoples, their land, and their traditions. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith asserts, Indigenous knowledge, culture, and identity are linked to the land (Smith, 2021). Even when far from their homelands, this connection persists in the form of collective memory and worldview. To further explore the active and enduring nature of this relationship, Coulthard and Simpson’s concept of “grounded normativity” provides a useful framework. Grounded normativity emphasises that Indigenous peoples’ relationship with their land is not just symbolic but an active, material, and spiritual engagement, forming the basis for their cultural practices, resistance, and identity

formation (Coulthard, 2014, Simpson, 2017). The land is not merely a passive backdrop but an active participant in Indigenous social and cultural life, anchoring their values and helping navigate the complexities of modernization. In Northeast China, this framework helps explain how ethnic minorities such as the Manchu balance modernization with cultural preservation. By actively maintaining a strong connection to their land, these communities reconstruct their cultural identity, blending tradition and modernity, with the land central to their cultural autonomy amid contemporary challenges.

Indigenous minorities in Northeast China, such as the Manchu, Evenki, and Oroqen, are undergoing profound transformations in cultural heritage and identity. Min Chenghua highlights how modern consumer culture and urban lifestyles are undermining traditional ways of living and community structures, revealing the initial stages of these changes (Min, 2021, pp.20-27). This process involves the weakening of the economic base and the disruption of ethnic settlement patterns, directly impacting the continuity of cultural traditions like language and customs.

This theoretical framework is exemplified in Gu Tao's documentary *Aoluguya* Series, which delves into the individual and community levels, documenting the struggles and efforts of the Evenki people amidst ecological changes and the disappearance of hunting culture. It portrays the exploration and reshaping of cultural identity within the tension between tradition and modernity (Gu, 2021). Through these studies, we see a coherent perspective from macro to micro, from theory to practice, revealing the complex process by which Northeast China's ethnic minorities seek to redefine and preserve their cultural identity and traditional values in the face of globalization and modernization.

Northeast China's Indigenous minorities, such as the Manchu, have experienced multiple transformations and disruptions in their cultural identity throughout history. From being the cultural centre as the "Dragon's Rise Land" (龙兴之地) during the Qing

Dynasty to becoming synonymous with “counter-revolution” and “traitor” during the Republic of China period, and then being imagined by Japanese colonizers as the subordinate “Manchurian nation” (Shao, 2011, pp. 21-24) during the Manchukuo era, their cultural identity has undergone continual contestation and reconstructed. Even after being formally recognized as members of the Chinese national family following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, they continue to face the dual pressures of modernization and Sinicization. This demonstrates the fragility and resilience of cultural identity, as the Evenki and Manchu navigate the complexities of modern existence while attempting to preserve their cultural heritage.

In this context, I have drawn on a range of Indigenous theories and methodologies to provide new perspectives for understanding the situation of Northeast China’s ethnic minorities. Jo-ann Archibald’s theory of Indigenous “Storywork” emphasises that the interaction between stories, storytellers, and listeners creates a synergy that generates meaning, prompting people to strive to understand and grasp these meanings (Archibald, 2008, p.ix). This has inspired me to delve deeply into the oral histories and cultural traditions of these minorities. By analysing the legends and histories recounted by Shifosi Villagers such as Jiao Wanju and Zhang Suyun, I aim to reveal how the worldview and cultural identity of Northeast China’s Indigenous minorities are closely linked to their land.

Through oral narratives and close-up shots, my documentary reveals the metaphorical significance of the land as a cultural landmark and spiritual home, expressing the Indigenous people’s reverence for the land and their ecological ethics that honour nature. The creation process of the documentary itself is an endeavour to practice cultural self-awareness and demonstrate Indigenous subjectivity. As Michelle Raheja points out, visual sovereignty means that Indigenous filmmakers have the right to present images and tell stories according to their cultural traditions, rather than merely catering to mainstream societal expectations (Raheja, 2010, p.xi).

In Chapter 5, I will specifically discuss how my documentary adheres to the principles of Indigenous visual sovereignty, showcasing the relationship between the Indigenous people and their land through their perspectives and voices. This practice of Indigenous visual sovereignty not only helps correct mainstream media's misrepresentations and stereotypes of Indigenous images but also serves as a vital manifestation of Indigenous cultural self-awareness and identity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I explore the impact of globalization on the understanding and application of Indigeneity, analysing the strategies and limitations of the Chinese government in protecting Indigenous rights. Globalization has profoundly influenced the concept of Indigeneity, challenging the adaptability of traditional cultures and social structures (Appadurai, 1996). By comparing Indigenous policies in various regions, such as Australia and North America, which are considered “white settler” countries (Merlan, 2009, pp. 303-333), I reveal the complex interactions between culture and land rights, emphasising the significance of these policy differences. The Chinese government has achieved some success in protecting Indigenous rights, but it also faces difficulties and challenges (Ma, 2013, pp.42-58). Combining a global perspective with local practices, especially the experiences of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, I deepen the understanding of the multidimensional and complex nature of Indigenous issues.

Moreover, I emphasise the importance of multidimensional perspectives in Indigenous studies. Scholars like Smith, Wilson, Archibald, and Christian have elucidated the characteristics of Indigenous knowledge systems from different angles (Smith, 2021, Wilson, 2008, Archibald, 2008, Christian, 2017), guiding my research on the culture of ethnic minorities in Northeast China. By examining global theories and methods in Indigenous studies, this Chapter outlines the current state of Indigenous research in Northeast China and proposes potential directions for future

research. In my project, I will explore Indigenous visual creation as a form of cultural expression, analysing its role in shaping and conveying Indigenous cultural identity. The concept of visual sovereignty highlights the relationship between land and identity (Raheja, 2010), which is crucial to my research line, as it expands the scope of visual culture studies and offers new perspectives for understanding the relationship between Indigenous people and their land.

My work will address the research gap in the existing literature regarding the differences between global understanding and local practice of Indigeneity. Merely criticizing Eurocentrism is insufficient, as many criticisms ultimately reinforce a Eurocentric worldview (Dirlik, 2002). By thoroughly analysing the cases of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, this research will demonstrate how cross-cultural academic exchange, and theoretical application can enhance global understanding of Indigenous issues. This will contribute to establishing a more comprehensive and culturally respectful global academic framework.

Chapter 3

Indigenous Methodologies in Cross-Cultural Contexts: Application and Challenges

Chapter Overview

Following the examination of ethnic identity and globalization, this chapter delves into the methodological tools needed to study these identities in Northeast China, particularly through the lens of Indigenous methodologies. These include Margaret Kovach's theories on Indigenous methodologies, Jo-ann Archibald's Indigenous "Storywork", Shawn Wilson's Indigenous research methodologies, Dorothy Christian's Indigenous film aesthetics, and the explanations of "Indigeneity" by Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Dorothy Christian. Particularly, Kovach's book *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts* systematically expounds on the characteristics and implications of Indigenous methodologies and their application in cross-cultural research. This has been pivotal in integrating various theoretical perspectives and reflecting on research ethics. These theories and methods are intertwined to offer an in-depth perspective, facilitating a deeper understanding of the cultural identities, knowledge systems, and land relationships of the ethnic minorities in Northeast China.

Research Participants and Community Engagement

The following table provides an overview of the research participants involved in this study. This information is essential for contextualizing the study's methodology, including data collection strategies and engagement with different communities. While I conducted fieldwork in Shifosi Village, only two respondents from the village participated in my interviews, and neither identified as Indigenous. However, their perspectives remain valuable as they provide insights into the socio-cultural

environment of Shifosi Village and its interactions with Indigenous groups.

Although neither respondent was of Sibe ethnicity, both possessed historical memories of the Sibe people and their presence in the village. Rather than focusing solely on individual ethnic identities, I approached the research by considering Shifosi Village as a cultural entity, where the collective historical consciousness, cultural practices, and oral traditions contribute to the broader narrative of the Sibe people.

| Name Nation | Language Age Gender | Location | Roles |
|-----------------------------------|--|-------------------|---|
| Dai Wenqiang Han Chinese | Manchu, Chinese Age 36 Male | Shenyang | Cultural scholar with deep understanding of Northeastern minority cultures, owns a traditional archery club, deep knowledge of Northeast history, especially Qing Dynasty Manchu history, and traditional archery. |
| Zhuo Kailuo Han Chinese | Chinese Age 43 Male | Shenyang, Beijing | Independent film and documentary director, associate professor at Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, explores contemporary life of lower-class people in the Northeast, works feature typical contemporary Northeast elements. |
| Jiao Wanju Han Chinese | Chinese Age 68 Male | Shifosi Community | Community member of Shifosi Village, former employee at Qi Xing Shan area, shares stories and legends about the village with over 400 years of history. |
| Li Tie Han Chinese | Chinese Age 37 Male | Shenyang | Experienced in film production and theory, especially Northeastern themed films, teaches film courses at a university, active in Shenyang and the Northeast region. |

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|--|-----------------------------|--|
| Ren Yi Han Chinese | Chinese Age 37 Male | Shenyang | Professional videographer with rich experience in video production, unique insights into Northeastern and traditional cultures, a typical Northeastern visual storyteller. |
| Liu Lihong Han Chinese | Chinese Age 65 Male | Shenyang | Former head of the photography department at Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, significant figure in contemporary Chinese photography, focuses on Northeastern culture in his works. |
| Zhang Suyun Mongolian | Chinese, Mongolian Age 71 Female | Shifosi Community | Community member of Shifosi Village with Mongolian heritage, village committee representative, deeply understands village development and minority cultures, shares legends about the village. |
| Song Xingyuan Han Chinese | Chinese Age 43 Male | Shenyang, Beijing, Shanghai | Contemporary artist known for oil painting and image works featuring Northeastern visual elements, deep understanding of Northeastern culture, rich experience in artistic exchange with ethnic minorities. |
| Zheng Jinling Korean | Korean, Chinese Age 34 Female | Shenyang, Seoul | Researcher and curator in Sino-Korean cultural studies, lecturer at Luxun Academy of Fine Arts, focuses on identity relations among Chinese and Korean artists, deep understanding of ethnic identity in contemporary art. |

By analysing this set of interview materials, I can gain a deep insight into the interweaving of the diversity of Northeastern culture and the individuality of its people. Northeastern culture, rooted in rich historical heritage and regional

characteristics, shows respect for history and cherishes traditional crafts through Dai Wenqiang's traditional archery culture. Meanwhile, artists such as Zhuo Kailuo and Song Xingyuan explore the collision between modernity and Northeastern cultural identity through independent films and painting, reflecting how artists combine personal perspectives with regional culture to create profound cultural expressions. The stories and legends of community members like Zhang Suyun and Jiao Wanju not only preserve cultural memories but also showcase the unique manifestation and impact of culture in individual lives.

During my conversation with Professor Liu Lihong, a professor at Luxun Academy of Fine Arts and head of the Photography Department, I was reminded of his profound influence on my academic and artistic development. As a distinguished photographic artist and educator, as well as my graduate supervisor, his guidance has been instrumental in shaping my early exploration of photography. Through our discussion, the significance of art and academic research in capturing and expressing cultural diversity was further reinforced.

The Participants' work demonstrates how individuals contribute to the preservation and understanding of culture through professional knowledge and creative efforts. These interviews collectively reveal the complexity and richness of Northeastern culture and how it maintains vitality and relevance against the backdrop of globalization and modernization. Artists, scholars, and community members explore and express cultural identities in their unique ways, preserving traditional elements while incorporating modern perspectives and individual uniqueness, showing the dynamic interaction between culture and individuals.

Indigenous Theories in Northeast Chinese Ethnic Studies:

Developing Localized Research Perspectives and Practices

Kovach's book *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and*

Contexts emphasises that Indigenous methodologies are distinct from Western paradigms. Although connected to certain qualitative research methods, they are distinctive because they originate from tribal knowledge (Kovach, 2009, p.17). This insight has guided me in adapting Indigenous theories to the specific circumstances and knowledge systems of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, developing localized research perspectives rather than merely replicating Western paradigms. Kovach also notes that Indigenous knowledge systems are action-oriented, concerned with living according to specific values (Kovach, 2009, pp.62-63). This resonates with Shawn Wilson's view that everything is interconnected. In my research, this inspires me to focus on the cultural values and worldviews embedded in the daily practices of Indigenous peoples in Northeast China, as well as their multiple connections with the land, history, and community.

Furthermore, Kovach emphasises that Indigenous research should have a decolonizing agenda, aimed at both healing and transformation. When researchers ask Indigenous people for their stories, they must be aware that this process can foster spiritual healing related to decolonization, but it may also risk reactivating trauma, particularly when the stories involve historical oppression (Kovach, 2009, p.125). To mitigate this risk, my research adopts a collaborative approach, ensuring participants are fully engaged and their well-being prioritized. These insights are critical for understanding the situation of ethnic minorities in Northeast China. Industrialization and urbanization have eroded traditional ways of life, while mainstream discourse often marginalizes these groups by portraying them as “backward” and in need of modernization. Zhang Xudong observes that modernity in China is frequently associated with the Han image, while ethnic minorities are “primitivized” in the process (Zhang, 1999, pp. 12-20). In this context, decolonizing perspectives and cultural revitalization, as advocated by Indigenous theories, become particularly important.

In my documentary filmmaking, I adhere to the principle of visual sovereignty as

advocated by Jolene Rickard, Michelle Raheja, and Dorothy Christian. This principle affirms that Indigenous communities have the right to represent themselves in their own ways, creating visual works according to their cultural traditions rather than passively accepting externally imposed stereotypes (Raheja, 2010, Christian, 2017, Rickard, 2011). Through creating documentaries, I explore and showcase the diversity and complexity of the cultures of ethnic minorities in Northeast China. These documentaries not only authentically record the daily lives of Indigenous communities but also represent a practice of visual sovereignty—a capability for Indigenous people to present images and tell stories according to their own cultural traditions (Christian, 2017). For a long time, mainstream media and society have tended to reproduce ethnic minorities in stereotypical and simplistic ways, overlooking their internal diversity and complexity. The voices and perspectives of Indigenous communities are often marginalized, and they lose the right to interpret and display their own culture. I endeavour to fully display the inherited wisdom of the ethnic minorities in Northeast and their harmonious coexistence with the land and nature through documentary footage, oral histories, and ceremonial displays.

Gu Tao's documentary work on the Indigenous peoples of Northeast China, exemplifies this concept by showcasing the complex situations and distinctive cultural identities of Indigenous groups, challenging mainstream representations. This insight inspires me that Indigenous researchers and creators should find the right balance between respecting traditions, serving the community, and breaking new ground through ongoing interaction with the community. This resonates with Shao Dan's in-depth analysis in *Remote Homeland, Recovered Borderland Manchus, Manchoukuo, and Manchuria, 1907-1985*, which examines the territorial ownership and ethnic identity shifts in the Northeast region across different historical periods. The Manchu, as an Indigenous people of Northeast China, illustrate how the construction of ethnic identity is profoundly influenced by sovereign politics and national discourse. Shao Dan observes:

“The Manchu redefined their relationship with the regimes that claimed sovereignty over their homeland in various ways. They revised the narratives about their past roles as conquerors in the 17th century and as colonized subjects in the 20th century, representing their homeland and historical heritage in different ways, redefining the relationship between their ethnic identity and national identity, and utilizing their ethnic identity as a social resource in the constantly changing political landscape” (Shao, 2011, p. 5).

In Shao’s research, the process of the Manchu people redefining their ethnic identity and national identity is discussed not only as a reinterpretation of the past but also as an active shaping of their future role. This aligns with the perspective proposed by Wang Dewei, who posits that situating the Manchu people within the broad context of China’s modernity transformations and examining their interactions with external forces such as Han regimes, Japanese colonizers, and Soviet powers offers a method to understand the complex psychological landscape. This includes both the anxiety over the decline of traditional culture and a yearning to reaffirm ethnic identity (Wang, 2021, pp. 60-75). This perspective aids in a deeper understanding of the historical experiences of ethnic minorities in the Northeast and their complex perceptions of ethnic identity and cultural heritage. Such historical scrutiny not only reveals the anxieties caused by the decline of traditional culture but also showcases a strong desire for the reaffirmation of ethnic identity, thereby emphasising the importance of understanding these historical encounters in grasping our current predicament.

As a documentary filmmaker from an ethnic minority in Northeast China, I must engage with sensitivity and cultural awareness, listening to and recording our own voices, and presenting our struggles and choices amid monumental changes in the era (Christian, 2017). This resonates with what Zhao and Liu points out, in the process of constructing cultural identities, contemporary Chinese minorities face pressures of

global cultural homogenization and Deterritorialization, which threaten traditional cultures and local distinctiveness. On the other hand, they must navigate their relationships with mainstream society within the political and ideological frameworks of the nation-state, striving for cultural distinctiveness and space for development (Zhao and Liu, 2021, pp.68-74). Linking my personal experiences with the overall transformation of Chinese society is a method to reimagine equal, diverse, and inclusive ethnic relations. This is not only a mission as a scholar but also a responsibility as a minority ethnic filmmaker.

In the age of globalization, It is important to reflect not only on cultural continuity amidst the discontinuities of historical development but also to seek contemporary expressions of ethnic modernity within a multicultural context. (Zhang, 2005, p.13) . By drawing on Indigenous theories and methods and integrating the specific contexts of Northeastern minorities, it is possible to establish Indigenized research paradigms and filmmaking practices that more sensitive and appropriate.

Indigenous Research Paradigms in Northeast China's Ethnic Studies

In my doctoral research, I have employed a critical Indigenous qualitative research paradigm. This paradigm is rooted in Indigenous worldviews and epistemologies, emphasising relationality, ethical responsibilities, and reciprocity in the research process, aiming to empower Indigenous communities and foster social change (Wilson, 2008, Smith, 2021). It challenges the colonial legacies of mainstream academic research, offering Indigenous researchers an alternative paradigm that allows them to highlight their cultural characteristics and demands.

As noted above, while Indigenous methodologies share some common ground with qualitative research paradigms (Kovach, 2017), Indigenous knowledge is deeply embedded in distinctive tribal languages and ways of thinking, which are difficult to fully express using Western academic language. While Chinese language and culture

may seem closer to Indigenous ways of thinking due to their shared cultural and geographical context, challenges remain. Indigenous knowledge systems often rely on specific linguistic and symbolic structures unique to their own languages, which can be lost or distorted when translated into Mandarin Chinese. For instance, many tribal worldviews, such as the Oroqen people's understanding of the spiritual connection between humans and nature, are deeply rooted in oral traditions and local dialects. These cannot be entirely captured even in Chinese. More importantly, Indigenous knowledge fundamentally differs from Western knowledge and cannot be fully adapted to Western research paradigms. Guided by distinctive tribal epistemological framework, Indigenous methodologies challenge and supplement mainstream, often Western-centric, academic paradigms (Wilson, 2008, pp.175-179). This divergence is best understood through the concept of grounded normativity, which refers to ethical frameworks that emerge from long-standing relationships to land and place. As Glen Sean Coulthard and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson explain, place-based knowledge and practices that cannot be divorced from the specific contexts in which they are rooted (Coulthard and Simpson, 2016, pp. 249-255). In the Chinese discourse, research on ethnic minorities and Indigenous groups seeks to explore and express practices deeply tied to their distinct cultural, historical, and social contexts. Both Indigenous methodologies and Chinese minority research challenge and enrich dominant academic frameworks through their commitment to place-based solidarities. As Wilson argues (2001), it is time to move beyond reliance on Western research traditions, recognizing that knowledge is neither culturally nor politically neutral. Thus, Indigenous methodologies and qualitative research form an outsider-insider relationship to some extent (Kovach, 2012, p.31).

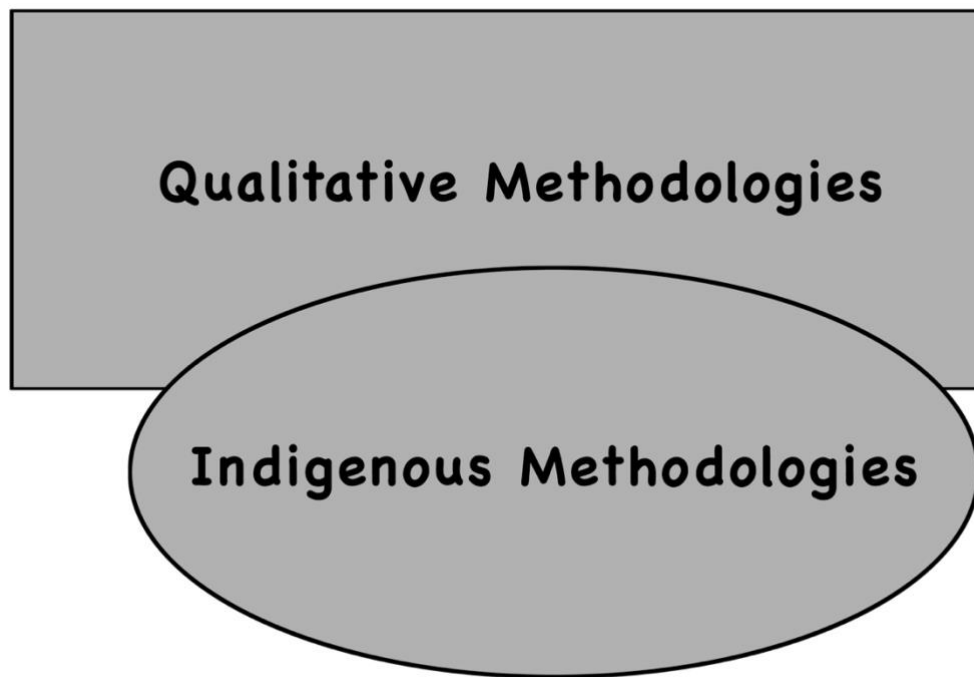


Figure 3 Positioning Indigenous methodologies within qualitative research. (Kovach, 2009).

To achieve this, I have drawn on Kovach’s perspectives, creatively integrating Indigenous methodologies with qualitative research methods. Initially, my research design reflects the relational ontologies and epistemologies of Indigenous research. As Shawn Wilson emphasises, Indigenous research views all existence as interconnected, and the research process itself is about forming connections with others, with the environment, and with the spiritual world (Wilson, 2008). While this perspective is common among many Indigenous researchers, it is important to recognize that each Indigenous community has its own worldview and epistemology, shaped by their specific cultural, historical, and environmental contexts. In the case of Shifosi Village, the Sibe and Manchu people’s identities are deeply rooted in their ancestral lands, rich history, and distinctive cultural traditions that have persisted through generations.

I have chosen the Indigenous Methodology diagram integrated by Jana Fox (2021) as a significant theoretical guide. This choice stems from the profound insights encapsulated in the diagram, which align closely with the themes and methods of my study. Fox’s Indigenous Methodology diagram synthesizes the intellectual

contributions of several Indigenous theory pioneers, including Shawn Wilson, Margaret Kovach, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and Jo-ann Archibald. Wilson discusses four key aspect of Indigenous research paradigms: ontology (the nature of reality), epistemology (the nature of thinking or knowing), methodology (how knowledge is gained), and axiology (ethics and value systems), emphasising that these aspects are interconnected and that research is a ceremonial act within this framework; Kovach elucidates the importance of rooting Indigenous methodologies in tribal epistemologies; Smith critiques the colonial legacy of Western academic research, calling for Indigenous people to reshape cultural identities through research; Archibald introduces the “Storywork” method, underscoring the significance of telling, listening to, and experiencing stories. Fox’s diagram presents these Indigenous theorists’ core insights in an interconnected visual form, outlining the basic framework, internal logic, and distinctions from mainstream Western research paradigms of Indigenous research methodologies, offering researchers a concise and comprehensive theoretical reference system.

Fox’s (2021) Indigenous Methodology Diagram has been crucial in clarifying my research direction and broadening my methodological perspective. The diagram’s depiction of Indigenous research paradigms naturally corresponds with my study on the cultural expression and identity recognition of ethnic minorities in Northeast China. As Wilson articulates, Indigenous research concerns the sacred connections between people and the land, ancestors, and descendants (Wilson, 2008). These connections are not just symbolic; they form the foundation for an individual’s responsibility and reciprocity. Responsibility here refers to the ethical duty individuals have towards maintaining and honoring these sacred relationships. Reciprocity, in turn, highlights the mutual exchange and care that arises from these connections. Wilson’s paradigm stresses that research itself must be an act of responsibility and reciprocity, reflecting the ongoing, living relationship between the researcher, the community, and the environment. This perspective directly resonates with the core argument in chapter five. The relationship of Northeastern minorities with the land is

both material and spiritual; it is manifested in livelihoods such as hunting and gathering, and is engraved in oral traditions, rituals, and cultural ceremonies, including facilitating and celebrating hunting and gathering activities. These ceremonies not only serve as a way to ensure success in hunting and gathering but also reinforce the tribe's spiritual connection to the land and natural world, further anchoring tribal identity in their environmental and cultural practices.

The concepts outlined on the right side of the diagram, such as relational action, inquiry strategies, and re-storying /interpretation, lay the theoretical foundation for the research methods I adopted in the Methodology chapter. I utilize qualitative methods such as in-depth interviews, participatory observation, as well as listening oral history, extensively collecting first-hand data, aiming to understand and present the living world of Indigenous peoples from their perspective. This approach is in high congruence with the epistemological orientation of Indigenous research that emphasises "relation" and "reciprocity." Engaging in communication with Indigenous communities and inviting them to participate in the research process and review my research texts is both a respect for Indigenous knowledge sovereignty and a matter of academic ethics.

In various chapters of my thesis, I analyse practices in documentary creation by Gu Tao and others regarding Northeastern ethnic minorities. For example, in the chapter "Visual Sovereignty and Cultural Continuity," I examine how Gu Tao's documentary work reflects Indigenous peoples' sovereignty over their images and stories, which directly responds to Linda Tuhiwai Smith's advocated "decolonizing methodologies." Likewise, in chapter six I employ Jo-ann Archibald's "Storywork" theory to analyse the oral traditions of Northeastern minorities, highlighting the distinctive role of storytelling in cultural heritage. These analyses are closely reliant on the Indigenous theoretical core succinctly outlined in the diagram, ensuring methodological coherence throughout the different sections of my thesis.

While the Indigenous methodology diagram distinctly differentiates Indigenous research paradigms from Western research traditions, in my application, I do not simply oppose the two but strive to facilitate a dialogue between the two epistemological traditions. I centre the research on the situations and demands of the minority ethnic subjects, adhering fundamentally to their cultural experiences and value concepts, and endeavour to tell their stories with their voices and perspectives. Also, I draw on relevant theoretical resources from Western anthropology and sociology, revealing the distinctiveness of the experiences of Northeastern ethnic minorities through comparative analysis.

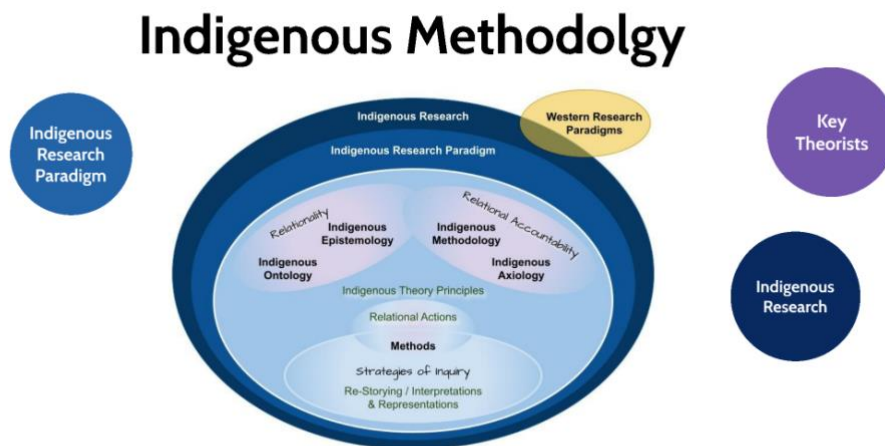


Figure 4 Framework for Indigenous Methodology: Approaches and Paradigms (Fox, 2021)

Applying Indigenous methodologies within the context of Northeast China's cultural discourse involves, firstly, a deep understanding of the region's Indigenous culture and traditions, which includes engaging with Northeast myths, rituals, and stories. These cultural elements provide a framework for understanding and interpreting Northeastern culture. As marginalized groups, Indigenous people have historically faced oppression from mainstream society, and their research methods are characterized by a clear deconstructive and resistant consciousness (Smith, 2021). This perspective can bring a critical view to my research, allowing for reflection on

the issues faced by minority ethnic groups in the Northeast during the process of modernization.

The integration of Indigenous methodologies with the cultural discourse of the Northeast allows for allowing access to material and the establishment of close researcher-participant relationships. It also provides multiple analytical perspectives, strengthening the reflexivity and ethical considerations of the research. The Northeast, as a frontier area in China, is endowed with a rich diversity of Indigenous cultures. Understanding and expressing these local cultures appropriately is vital. Indigenous methodologies emphasise the importance of grounding research in the local context, which aligns with my goal of deeply interpreting the Northeastern Indigenous context. Context is essential for understanding human behaviour and cultural meaning (Clifford, 1973, p.18). thus, my approach involves specific fieldwork rather than abstract theorization.

During the research, I take steps to ensure that the focus on local culture does not lead to its commercialization or nationalistic exploitation, as Indigenous research ethics stress principles of reciprocity and non-harm (Kovach, 2009; Archibald, 2008). This entails establishing and maintaining a relationship with Northeastern Indigenous communities based on trust, respect, and reciprocity. Collaborating with the community ensures that my research is beneficial and relevant and assists me in considering the particularities and needs of Northeastern culture, thereby avoiding the commodification of Indigenous culture (Chilisa, 2019).

Indigenous research methodologies provide me with a new framework for understanding and interpreting the culture of Northeast China. To ensure the accuracy and relevance of the research, it is crucial to establish a continuous relationship with local Indigenous communities. As Kovach emphasises, research becomes more valuable through close cooperation with the community (Kovach, 2009, pp.17-18). By adopting a culturally sensitive research approach, I focus on the the distinctiveness

and needs of Northeastern culture, avoiding any risk of cultural commodification or nationalistic exploitation. This method not only reflects a profound understanding of the participants of study but also ensures the ethical integrity and dignity of the research process.

Exploring Northeastern Minority Cultures: A Framework of Research Design and Ethical Engagement

Before initiating in-depth conversations with nine individuals from Northeast China, including ethnic cultural scholars/tradition bearers, local visual artists/scholars, community representatives/oral historians, and cross-cultural researchers, I secured ethical approval with the PG2/E1 form from the University of Wales Trinity Saint David (Approval No. EC1164, approved on July 14, 2023). The participating visual artists and scholars, most of whom have extensive experience in their field, contribute to the preservation and representation of Northeastern culture. Meanwhile, the cultural inheritors of Shifosi, being Indigenous people, have a profound understanding of the land and culture. During preliminary contacts, I explained the research ethics procedures to the participants and obtained their consent to be acknowledged by name in the thesis, thus recognizing their value as cultural individuals, rather than anonymous data sources. Each participant signed an informed consent form, which is archived in the appendix of the thesis.

Interviews were mostly conducted at the participants' workplaces, with research ethics forms and informed consent documents typically sent via email a week in advance for their review and signature. Before starting each interview, I reconfirmed that participant had received the documents and reviewed the contents of the consent form and interview guide with them. I also committed to sending copies of the interview records for participant review and sought their opinions on sections of the thesis where their statements would be quoted. These procedures reflect respect for

participants' right to be informed and their privacy, as well as the importance placed on research ethics.

I chose Shifosi as the location for documentary filming due to my profound connection to the land. Over the years, camping near the Liao River with friends and family has given me a distinctive understanding of and emotional connection to the local terrain. As Archibald states, the land itself is a powerful educator and source of wisdom (Archibald, 2008). Long-term engagement has given me a sense of belonging to Shifosi, an important foundation for conducting Indigenous research.

Starting in September 2023, I made frequent visits to Shifosi, aiming to integrate into the local life as a member of the village before commencing filming and research. During this time, I adopted research methods aligned with Indigenous cultural features, striving to establish trust with community members through equal exchange, listening to stories, and participating in experiences (Chilisa, 2019). This immersive, participatory approach aligns with what anthropologist Clifford Geertz terms “deep hanging out” spending extended periods of time with a community. I visited the village's forest guardians, convenience store owners, and village representatives, asking them to recount the past and present of the village through oral history. Engaging in their daily activities, and building relationships to gain a deep, contextualized understanding of their culture. Furthermore, I actively participated in the villagers' daily labour, communal meals, and entertainment activities, conducting participant observation through daily interactions. The life insights and personal journeys shared by the villagers during work and leisure greatly enriched my understanding of village culture and brought us closer together.

Visual Ethnography: Documentary Filmmaking and Collaboration

Visual ethnography emerges as a critical method and practice in my doctoral study. Through the creation of documentaries, I attempt to represent the lives and cultural

expressions of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, exploring the complex relationships between Indigenous peoples, the land, traditions, and their communities. My documentary, *Twilight Over the Silent Hill* focuses on the village of Shifosi, capturing the cultural continuity and change of local Indigenous peoples amid modernization. In the creative process, I draw on the core concepts of Indigenous research methodologies, such as relationality, respect, reciprocity, and collaboration, striving to produce a work that reflects the subjectivity and agency of Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, I am influenced by documentaries about Northeast China's ethnic minorities, especially the practices of director Gu Tao, who provides valuable theoretical and methodological guidance.

In the Chapter 7, I analysed how Gu Tao's documentaries use a simple yet poetic visual language to document the survival dilemmas and cultural loss of the Evenki people in the North during the process of modernization. He adheres to the creative philosophy of "interpreting the emotional connection between people and the land with personal emotion and knowledge," using visuals to represent the sacred connection between Indigenous people, the land, and nature (Gu, 2021). This philosophy aligns with the "relational ontology" of Indigenous research as expressed by Wilson, who says that in Indigenous worldviews, all existence is interconnected, with land, ancestors, and descendants forming a continuous network of relationships (Wilson, 2008). Gu Tao's distinctive visual aesthetics and narrative style, such as long takes, poetic montage, and authentic synchronous sound, not only preserve the oral narrative tradition passed down by the Evenki but also contain ecological wisdom of coexistence between humans and nature. Inspired by this, when filming *Twilight Over the Silent Hill*, I use similar visual language to capture the sacred connections between the Indigenous people of Shifosi with the land, history, and even the spiritual world.

I have also drawn inspiration from the participatory approach and ethical principles demonstrated in Gu Tao's documentaries. As Christian points out, Indigenous visual creation should uphold the principle of "cultural congruence," with narrative methods

and visual styles that align with Indigenous cultural traditions and aesthetic preferences. This requires creators to approach with an open, humble, and reflexive attitude, to listen to Indigenous voices, learn their land-based wisdom, and establish relationships based on trust and reciprocity (Christian, 2017). Gu Tao exemplifies this, rooted in the Evenki community for many years, fully engaging in Indigenous life, attentively listening to their stories, inviting them to participate in the filming process, and building relationships that go beyond the typical researcher-researched dynamic. Inspired by him, I began visiting Shifosi Village in September 2023. During my initial visits, I noticed that many villagers were engaged in selling fruits and vegetables grown in their own homes. It was during one of these visits that I purchased apples from an older lady, Zhang Suyun. This seemingly small act led to a meaningful conversation, during which Zhang shared her thoughts about the village and its daily life. Over time, through frequent visits and casual conversations, I explained the purpose of my project to Zhang and gradually gained her trust and consent to include her perspective in my documentary.

I also frequently visited the convenience store at the village entrance, where conversations with the store owner helped me establish rapport with the community. After spending several months getting to know the villagers and their daily lives, I returned in late November with my camera to begin shooting *Twilight Over the Silent Hill*. During filming, I primarily relied on static, long shots to reduce the influence of subjective camera techniques, seeking a balanced representation of life in the local communities of Shifosi. This method not only honors the autonomy of the subjects but also seeks to provide an authentic representation of Indigenous culture.

Storywork: Oral Histories and Cultural Transmission

Oral histories and stories are vital sources in my exploration, representing not just a narrative form for Indigenous peoples, but also a mode of education and a system of knowledge (Archibald, 2008). Through telling, listening, and experiencing, stories

connect individuals to family, tribe, land, conveying wisdom and strength. Inspired by Archibald's "Storywork", I listen to the lived experiences of local peoples from the Northeast with sensitivity and respect, seeing them as a medium that reflects their worldview, values, and cultural identity, not merely as data sources.

Archibald outlines seven principles to guide interactions with cultural stories: respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, integrity, interconnectedness, and synergy (Archibald, 2019, p.xi). With these principles, she demonstrates a close grasp of the "essence" of constructing meaning through storytelling. Archibald notes that her narrative approach is meant to inspire a re-examination and development of other "Storywork" theories, not to be universally applied to all Indigenous groups. Her insights profoundly influence me. The "Storywork" theory not only provides critical insights for my doctoral research but also facilitates many aspects of my documentary work.

Engaging in "Storywork" means respecting the cultural knowledge embedded within stories, honouring the people who hold and share those stories, using them as a moral guide. Conducting "Storywork" requires an understanding, appreciation, and adherence to the cultural norms inherent in storytelling, much like following specific patterns and techniques when weaving a basket. (Archibald, 2019, p.3)

In the process of collecting, organizing, and analysing oral materials and field observations, I deeply understood the profound implications of "Storywork." Archibald reminds us that listening to and sharing stories is not just a research tool but a process of learning, reflection, and relationship building. Each story encapsulates the narrator's life experiences and cultural richness and deserves to be treated with sincerity, recorded attentively, and presented faithfully (Archibald, 2008). In creating my documentary, I chose to let the Indigenous people of Shifosi speak for themselves. I invited the forest ranger, Jiao Wanju, to share his life experiences and the village's

transformations. His narration vividly brings to life the upheaval and perplexity the economic and social changes have wrought on his Indigenous village. Through sincere communication, humble listening, and full engagement, I gathered rich and reliable first-hand material.

During a conversation with Jiao Wanju, when he learned of my research into the history of the Sibe people, he kindly lent me a book from his collection that he had kept for many years, “Sibe Folk Tales Collection” (Guan, 2002). I was deeply grateful, as the legends featured in my documentary are drawn from this book. His gesture not only signified recognition and support for my research but also reflected the openness of Indigenous communities to knowledge inheritance and sharing. As Wilson notes, knowledge itself is held in the relationships and connections formed with the environment that surrounds us (Wilson, 2008, p.74). Jiao Wanju’s sharing was not only a response to the trust built through my prolonged engagement with the community but also exemplified the ethical imperatives of respect, reciprocity, and collaboration in Indigenous research.

This experience highlighted that Indigenous research must be a reciprocal process, where researchers and participants engage as equal partners. While equality is emphasised, researchers retain autonomy over methodological decisions (Christian, 2017). The villagers are active contributors, whose input can influence the research’s direction, illustrating the fluid and evolving nature of equality in research collaborations. In practice, the villagers’ agency was respected, ensuring their value and dignity as individuals were fully acknowledged. Strong emotional connections were formed based on equality and respect, transcending the typical researcher-subject dynamic. Collecting, preserving, and sharing the stories of Shifosi was vital not only for academic purposes but also reflected a sense of responsibility towards the village and its Indigenous culture.

From Outsider to Community Partner: A Reflexive Journey into Northeastern Minority Cultural Research

As a Han Chinese researcher who grew up in Northern China, I underwent a transformation from an “outsider” to a “community partner” in my exploration of the culture and visual expressions of Northeastern ethnic minorities. This shift not only impacted my research perspectives and methodological choices but also deepened my understanding of research ethics and intellectual property.

My background and early education gave me a limited and somewhat one-dimensional understanding of identity. Growing up in a relatively homogenous environment, I had few opportunities to deeply engage with the lives and cultures of ethnic minorities. Even during my education in photographic art, my influences were predominantly shaped by Western artistic concepts and aesthetic standards. This “Western centrism” significantly influenced my early creative practices, causing me to overlook my own cultural identity and traditions.

However, during my doctoral research, I began to question this situation. By reflecting on my academic and artistic journey, I realized the necessity, as a Chinese researcher, to break away from a singular Western perspective and explore and articulate indigenous visual cultural resources starting from my own cultural context. This endeavour was not only about preserving cultural features and ethnic identity but also about making distinctive and valuable contributions in a globalized context. As Margaret Kovach (2009) suggests, Indigenous researchers need to combine research with distinctive perspectives, proposing theories arising from cultural beliefs to ensure that their research is meaningful to their communities.

With this understanding, I began my fieldwork in Shifosi Village. However, as an ‘outsider,’ I initially felt uneasy and confused. I decided to start at the village

convenience store, gradually integrating into local life through daily interactions. In conversations with the store owner and Ms. Zhang Suyun, a community representative of Mongolian ethnicity who exemplifies the village's multicultural character, I explained my research purpose: to authentically document the current state of a Northeastern ethnic minority village through a documentary, thereby creating opportunities for cultural heritage preservation in Shifosi. Her position as a representative in a village historically associated with Sibe and Manchu communities offered a unique perspective on cultural preservation and community dynamics. As a non-Sibe minority ethnic representative, she occupied a position of being both an 'insider' and an 'outsider' in the community, and this unique positioning enabled her to better understand the challenges I faced as a researcher. Zhang's support not only provided cultural legitimacy for my research within the community but also demonstrated how contemporary Indigenous communities often feature complex, overlapping identities that transcend simple ethnic categorizations.

In the early stages of my in-depth interviews, I often struggled to understand the expressions of the older generation due to my limited familiarity with their linguistic habits. Many of the community members in the village spoke a dialect-rich version of Northeastern Chinese, which often presented difficulties when translating their words into English, leading to inevitable loss of nuance. For instance, when Jiao Wanju described the traditional architectural styles of the village's houses in the documentary, he used expressions rarely heard in urban contexts. He described the base of a bowl using the word "butt," which has no direct equivalent in English that conveys the same imagery. Similarly, while explaining how to make a door slide more smoothly, he used the term "滑溜" (literally greasily), which I initially struggled to interpret in this specific context.

Another example came from Zhang Suyun, who shared a story about "San Tai Ye" (三太爷) has been protecting the people and land of Shifosi. At first, I had no

understanding of what kind of deity “San Tai Ye” was. To provide context for the audience in the documentary, I needed to investigate further. Through consulting local folklore and literature, I discovered that “San Tai Ye” is a weasel spirit that has become a deity in the local belief system.

These experiences taught me that the essence of conducting indigenous research lies in building meaningful connections—with people, the environment, and the spiritual realm.(Wilson, 2008). By participating in the villagers’ daily practise and listening to their life stories, and seeking clarification whenever I encountered unfamiliar terms, I gained valuable local knowledge and developed a more nuanced and poignant understanding of the history and culture of Shifosi Village. These efforts not only enhanced my ability to interpret and represent their stories but also strengthened the trust and emotional connection between me and the community members.

However, as my relationship with the villagers deepened, I became increasingly aware of the significant power dynamics in academic research. As a researcher, how could I ensure that my work aligned with the interests of the Indigenous community? How should the research outcomes benefit the community? With these questions, I began to reflect on my initial research motives and purposes. Did I harbour any preconceptions or biases toward the villagers? Was my research inadvertently reinforcing the mainstream society’s “gaze” on marginalized groups?

In response to these concerns, I made several attempts and adjustments during my research process. For example, in the creation of the documentary, I carefully avoided over-exposing and exploiting personal lives, instead focusing on depicting the natural and cultural landscape of the village. I also held a “premiere” of the film, inviting villagers to watch and provide feedback, and together we decided which content was suitable for public display. This approach embodies the concept of visual sovereignty, meaning that Indigenous people have the right to control how their images are represented. Because,

Indigenous methodologies tend to approach cultural protocols, values and behaviours as an integral part of methodology. They are ‘factors’ to be built in to research explicitly, to be thought about reflexively, to be declared openly as part of the research design, to be discussed as part of the final results of a study and to be disseminated back to the people in culturally appropriate ways and in a language that can be understood.

(Raheja, 2010, p.16)

My documentary creation process embodies the concept of visual sovereignty advocated by Raheja, emphasising that Indigenous people have the right to participate in, discuss, and decide how their images are portrayed. By inviting villagers to participate in the selection of content for the film and sharing research findings in a manner that respects their cultural practices, I integrated Indigenous cultural standards and values at every stage of my research. This "decolonization" of research methods highlights the cultural autonomy of the Indigenous people.

Reflections during the fieldwork phase have enriched and dynamized my understanding of the role of researchers in Indigenous studies. Researchers should not be "collectors" but rather “listeners,” “learners”, and “collaborators”, engaging in the generation of knowledge with attitudes of equality, respect, and reciprocity. This means that I must be fully aware of our position as researchers, carefully navigate the power dynamics with Indigenous communities, and strictly adhere to cultural norms and research ethics in the processes of acquiring, sharing, and disseminating Indigenous knowledge.

Indigenous Methodologies in a Cross-Cultural Context: Challenges, Reflections, and Practices

In my research, I have employed Indigenous methodologies to investigate the culture

and visual expressions of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, leading to valuable findings and insights. However, the process also revealed significant limitations and challenges. These obstacles arise both from the inherent complexities of Indigenous methodologies and from the constraints of my own research background and expertise. Reflecting critically on these limitations is essential for advancing the research, improving the practical application of these methodologies, and enhancing their overall credibility and academic rigor.

My understanding and interpretation of the culture of ethnic minorities in Northeast China are inevitably influenced by my own cultural background and biases. Although I strive to approach this study with openness and humility, my engagement with Indigenous knowledge systems remains in its early stages. As Christian points out, Indigenous knowledge is embedded in Indigenous cultural frameworks and ways of thinking, making it challenging to fully express using Western academic language. Importantly, tribal knowledge fundamentally differs from Western knowledge and cannot be simply fitted into Western research paradigms (Christian, 2017, Archibald, 2008, Smith, 2021). This reminds me to consistently maintain reflexivity and critically examine any biases or limitations in my understanding of minority cultures.

During the interview process, I deeply felt the power dynamics between researchers and the subjects of the study. As a researcher, my social status and authority are relatively higher compared to the villagers. This imbalance could lead the villagers to be wary of me and might even cause them to avoid engaging in communication with me. To mitigate this inequality, I took several measures: first, I explained the purpose of my research to the villagers to obtain their informed consent; second, I tried to conduct interviews in a casual conversation style to create a relaxed and equal atmosphere; third, I invited villagers to participate in the documentary filming and valued their opinions; fourth, I promised to share copies of the interview records and the film with the villagers. Through these efforts, I aimed to establish a relationship of mutual trust and reciprocity with the villagers, rather than approaching them from a

superior “collector” position to “extract” information.

Using Indigenous methodologies often presents a dilemma: accurately representing and interpreting Indigenous knowledge. I strive to faithfully depict the villagers’ lived experiences and cultural expressions, yet academic writing requires careful selection and interpretation of first-hand data. Throughout this process, I continuously reflect on maintaining a balance between theoretical abstraction and field practice, and on avoiding the oversimplification of Indigenous knowledge. To tackle this, I extensively quote interview materials in my thesis to present the villagers’ original narratives. In film editing, I prioritize objective long shots and reduce subjective editing to authentically capture the villagers’ life situations. Moreover, I have invited village representatives and Northeast cultural experts to serve as advisors, reviewing my articles and films to ensure balanced interpretations of local knowledge.

Applying Indigenous methodologies within the Chinese context requires practical adjustments to address the specific cultural, linguistic, and historical circumstances of Northeast China’s ethnic minorities. For example, unlike the spiritual conceptualization of land in Māori and First Nations communities, in the context of the Sibe and Manchu, land is often tied to daily agricultural practices and local legends, such as the historical narratives surrounding Qi Xing Shan in Shifosi Village. This necessitated a shift in my approach, focusing on documenting agricultural rituals and family-based oral histories rather than relying solely on symbolic interpretations. Additionally, linguistic adaptation was crucial: understanding the local dialects and communication norms of elderly villagers allowed me to navigate cultural nuances effectively.

Collaborating with local experts Dai Wenqiang, a Sibe cultural advocate and traditional archery enthusiast, was pivotal in deepening my understanding of Sibe culture. Dai introduced me to the historical and cultural significance of archery in Sibe traditions, explaining its origins in the Qing military system and its role in

fostering communal identity. Through his demonstrations of traditional bow-making techniques and explanations of archery terminology in Sibe language, I gained insights into the interplay between material culture and spiritual values. Furthermore, Dai shared migration stories and rituals tied to land, emphasising the Sibe people's enduring connection to their ancestral territories. These interactions not only enriched my documentary narrative by providing authentic cultural content but also facilitated trust-building with the local community, enabling me to conduct more nuanced fieldwork. Dai's contributions exemplify how local cultural bearers can serve as bridges between researchers and Indigenous communities, fostering a collaborative and respectful research process.

Engaging in Indigenous research, particularly in creating film and television works that involve Indigenous images, requires a high level of ethical sensitivity and social responsibility (Gergaud, 2021, pp.151-169). During the process of filming documentaries, I am aware that every choice of shot can influence viewers' perceptions and imaginations about Indigenous people. I strive to employ authentic recording techniques that faithfully represent the villagers' true way of life, in order to address the serious ethical issues of avoiding Idealization or artificial portrayal of Indigenous life, and accurately depicting their struggles, confusion, and even trauma amid societal changes.

Despite the numerous limitations and challenges inherent in using Indigenous methodologies for cross-cultural research, I still believe that by maintaining an open, humble, and reflective attitude, and through continuous self-examination and dialogic practice, these difficulties can be gradually overcome. As Wilson (2020) suggests, the process of Indigenous research itself involves forming connections with others, the environment, and the spiritual world. Every interaction with Indigenous peoples and the field is an opportunity to learn, reflect, and build relationships. With deep interactions with the villagers of Shifosi, my understanding of Indigenous circumstances continues to deepen, and my application of research methods becomes

more adept. While the scope of my doctoral research may limit a comprehensive engagement with the principles of reciprocity and empowerment as advocated in Indigenous research methodologies, I hope that this practice can make a modest contribution to the contemporary preservation and transmission of Indigenous knowledge systems, as well as offer practical insights for the innovation of cross-cultural research methodologies.

Chapter 4

Exploring Indigenous Theoretical Frameworks: Cultural Expression and Identity

Chapter Overview

With the comprehensive review of Indigenous research methodologies in the previous chapter, this chapter shifts focus on a deeper theoretical analysis of how these methodologies inform the interaction between cultural expression and identity within Indigenous communities in Northeast China. I have drawn upon a series of Indigenous theories and methodologies. These include Jo-ann Archibald's Indigenous "Storywork" theory, Shawn Wilson's Indigenous research methodologies, Dorothy Christian's Indigenous film aesthetics theory, and the concept of Indigeneity as articulated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Dorothy Christian. These theories and methodologies interweave, providing me with a distinctive and profound perspective that aids in understanding the cultural identity, knowledge systems, and land relationships of the ethnic minorities in Northeast China. Adhering to Indigenous research paradigms ensures the credibility and validity of these approaches within my research, reinforcing the authenticity and respect for the cultural context and lived experiences of the communities involved.

Indigenous Theory Perspectives: Cultural Expression and Identity of Northeast China's Ethnic Minorities

Jo-ann Archibald's "Storywork" theory emphasises the central role of stories in Indigenous knowledge transmission and formation, highlighting that the interaction between stories, storytellers, and listeners creates a synergistic effect. This interaction generates meaning through stories and encourages people to strive to understand and

grasp these meanings (Archibald, 2019, p.ix). This theory inspired me to delve into the oral histories and cultural traditions of the ethnic minorities in Northeast China. For instance, during my fieldwork, I interviewed Jiao Wanju, a villager from Shifosi, who narrated legends about the Shifosi Buddha statues and the history of Qi Xing Shan. By analysing these stories, I aim to uncover how the worldview and cultural identity of Northeast China's ethnic minorities are closely tied to their land. Mr. Jiao's narrative vividly demonstrates how the villagers of Shifosi construct and transmit collective memory, cultural identity, and moral values related to the land through orally transmitted stories. This perfectly exemplifies Archibald's emphasis on the crucial role of stories as carriers of cultural transmission.



Figure 5 Qi Xing Shan (screenshot from author's documentary)



Figure 6 Shi Fo Buddha in the Village (screenshot from author's documentary)

I connect Archibald's "Storywork" theory with Shawn Wilson's Indigenous research methodology to guide my practical and theoretical research. Wilson emphasises that all entities are interconnected, and this interconnectedness extends beyond human relationships to include connections between people and their environment, as well as the spiritual world (Wilson, 2001, pp. 175-179). In my research, Wilson's perspective guides me to explore the changes in territorial and cultural identity in Northeast China across different historical periods, revealing the complex interactions between people and the land. This theoretical framework encourages me to establish respectful and reciprocal relationships with local Indigenous people during fieldwork, listen to their voices, and understand their spiritual connections with the land.

Linda Tuhiwai Smith emphasises the inseparable link between Indigenous knowledge, culture, identity, and land, stating that Indigenous people are the original stewards of their territories. Their identity and knowledge systems originate from generations of relationships with the land (Smith, 2021, p.6 p.50 p.222). Dorothy Christian further elaborates, "Our culturally specific stories and ancestral knowledge from the land affect how Indigenous filmmakers relate to the land...what home/homelands means to Indigenous peoples" (Christian, 2017, p.289). In my research, I explore how the

ethnic minorities in Northeast China reconnect and reshape their relationship with the land and traditions during the modernization process to rebuild cultural identity. This process echoes the practical value of Indigenous theories and the continuous theme of place-based perspectives in my study.

By integrating the Indigenous theories and methodologies of scholars such as Archibald, Wilson, Christian, and Smith, I examine the cultural expressions and identity of Northeast China's ethnic minorities from an Indigenous perspective. These theories collectively build a multidimensional framework for understanding the oral traditions, ritual practices, visual aesthetics, and land ethics of these minorities. Specifically, through in-depth research on "Storywork", the connection between people and land, the aesthetic features of visual expression, and the profound meaning of Indigeneity, my study emphasises the importance of cultural transmission and innovation. It also highlights the urgency of preserving and developing minority cultures in the context of globalization.

This interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research approach not only enriches our understanding of the cultures of Northeast China's ethnic minorities but also provides valuable theoretical resources and practical insights for exploring their cultural revival and self-determination in a globalizing context. By drawing on Indigenous theories and methodologies, my research aims to foster respect and understanding for the cultural diversity of Northeast China's ethnic minorities, while emphasising the deep connections with land, traditions, and communities as essential components of cultural identity and knowledge systems.

Deterritorialization and Identity: The Cultural Dilemma and Identity Reconstruction of Ethnic Minorities in Northeast China

In the context of globalization and modernity, local cultural identities are undergoing

profound transformations. In his work *Modernity at Large Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Appadurai posits that Deterritorialization is a core characteristic of the contemporary global cultural economy. He argues that the transnational flow of populations, capital, and technology disrupts the traditional ties between culture and specific territories, leading to unstable and ambiguous cultural identities (Appadurai, 1996, p. 38). While this insight provides a critical perspective for understanding the current situation of ethnic minorities, its applicability to the unique circumstances of Indigenous peoples in China requires further examination. For Indigenous peoples, land is not merely a material basis for survival but also a carrier of cultural traditions and spiritual beliefs (Christian, 2017). Deterritorialization refers to the process by which cultural practices, identity formations, or social activities become disconnected from their original geographic and cultural contexts, often triggered by globalization, modernization, or political changes. This process frequently weakens or severs the traditional connections between culture and land. In contrast, Reterritorialization involves the re-establishment of connections between culture and land under new conditions, often achieved through rituals, storytelling, or other cultural practices. Shao Dan's analysis of Northeast China's ethnic dynamics during the 20th century offers critical insights into these dynamics in the context of Northeast China.

Shao's book *Remote Homeland, Recovered Borderland: Manchus, Manchukuo, and Manchuria, 1907–1985* highlights three major forces that shaped the transformation of Manchu identity: the Deterritorialization and provincialization of Manchuria during the late Qing; the remaking of national borders and ethnic boundaries during the Sino-Japanese contestation over Manchuria; and the power of the state to recategorize populations and ascribe ethnic identities in post-Qing republican regimes. While her study does not extend to contemporary times, it lays a foundation for understanding the historical development of ethnic identity in this region. My research builds upon this foundation to further explore these trajectories.

For example, the Qing government's prohibition on Han migration to Manchuria prior

to 1907 reflected efforts to preserve the Manchu homeland. However, the 1907 provincialization of Manchuria marked a turning point as the region was incorporated into the administrative framework of China Proper, opening the floodgates for Han settlement and reducing the cultural and political autonomy of the Manchu people. During the Manchukuo period (1932–1945), Japanese colonizers exploited Manchu nationalism to legitimize their rule, portraying the Manchus as central figures in a multi-ethnic colonial state while simultaneously undermining their autonomy (Shao, 2011, p. 109).

The Mao era (1949–1976) introduced both Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization processes that further reshaped Manchu identity. Land reform (1949–1953) dismantled traditional land ownership structures, severing ties between the Manchu people and their ancestral lands, while industrialization campaigns in the 1950s brought waves of Han migrants into Northeast China, diluting the region's ethnic distinctiveness. Simultaneously, policies such as the 1954 Ethnic Regional Autonomy Law offered limited Reterritorialization by granting the Manchu symbolic recognition as one of China's 56 ethnic groups. However, as Shao notes, this recognition often came with dual pressures of modernization and Sinicization, resulting in a hybridized identity that balanced cultural preservation with national integration (Shao, 2011, pp. 192-195). For instance, the creation of the first Manchu Autonomous County in Xinbin in 1985 symbolized a form of Reterritorialization, albeit one constrained by the broader framework of state-led ethnic policies.

Although the Manchu represent one of the most well-known ethnic minorities in Northeast China, they are not the only group undergoing these identity transformations. The Evenki and Oroqen peoples faced similar challenges of Deterritorialization through forced settlement policies during the 1950s and 1960s, which disrupted their traditional nomadic lifestyles. A more nuanced, localized analysis of these groups reveals additional complexities in Northeast China's ethnic landscape and underscores the region's ongoing negotiation of identity in response to

state policies and modernization.

Shao Dan's in-depth analysis of the territorial affiliations and ethnic identity changes in Northeast China during different historical periods provides crucial insights into understanding the contemporary situation of Northeast China's ethnic minorities. The Manchu, as the Indigenous people of Northeast China, exhibit a cultural identity that has undergone significant transformations, vividly illustrating how ethnic identity construction is profoundly influenced by sovereign politics and national discourse. Shao points out:

“The Manchus have redefined their relationship with the regimes claiming sovereignty over their homeland in various ways. They have revised the narratives of their past roles as conquerors in the 17th century and as the colonized in the 20th century, representing their homeland and historical heritage in different ways, redefining their relationship between ethnic identity and national identity, and using their ethnic identity as a social resource in the ever-changing political environment”
(Shao, 2011, p. 4).

Shao reveals how ethnic minorities in Northeast China, living in a borderland existence shaped by a complex historical backdrop, have faced challenges from external forces such as Han Chinese dynasties, Japanese colonizers, and Soviet influences. As a borderland, Northeast China has been a contested space, with shifting territorial affiliations and political control playing a critical role in reshaping the cultural identity of its Indigenous groups. These external forces have not only torn apart but also reconstructed the cultural traditions and identity of ethnic groups such as the Manchu, who were once central to Qing sovereignty but later became marginalized. This historical encounter has left a profound impact on the cultural memory and identity construction of contemporary Northeast China's ethnic minorities, forcing them to continuously negotiate their place within the nation-state

(Zhang, 2023, pp.180-183). Even after the founding of the People's Republic of China, where the Manchu were officially recognized as members of the Chinese national family and their cultural traditions continued, the dual pressures of modernization and Sinicization remain difficult to dissolve. As Shao Dan states:

“After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Manchu gained legal and political equality, and their cultural traditions continued. However, this ethnic equality did not immediately encourage the Manchu to claim their ethnic identity. The Manchu community had to bear the burden of the Qing Dynasty's failure to protect China from foreign imperialist invasions, as well as the historical 'errors' committed by Puyi and his followers during the war” (Shao, 2011, p. 293).

The Manchu, along with other ethnic minorities in Northeast China, must re-negotiate their relationship with mainstream society within the political and ideological framework of the nation-state, striving for cultural autonomy and development space (Liu, 2018). This process of identity negotiation is inevitably intertwined with the traumatic memories of cultural loss and the aspirations for ethnic revival.

Shao Dan's research provided a detailed historical context for the complex evolution of Manchu cultural identity, illustrating how external political forces shape ethnic identity. Appadurai's theory, on the other hand, aids in understanding the globalizing forces behind these changes and the resulting ambiguity and reconstruction of cultural identities. By combining these perspectives, one can delve deeper into the negotiation of identity and cultural inheritance of Northeast China's ethnic minorities in the modern context, revealing the interplay between globalization and Indigeneity in the cultural transformation of ethnic minorities. This comprehensive analysis not only enriches the understanding of Northeast China's ethnic minority cultures but also offers new perspectives and methodologies for the study of cultural identity in the context of globalization.

Cultural Struggle and Identity Reconstruction in Ethnographic

Documentaries

Cherokee Indigenous scholar Jeff Corntassel argues that Indigenous identity is not a static cultural attribute but a continuous process of resistance and resurgence (Corntassel, 2003, pp.75-100). This dynamic view of cultural identity, especially in the context of modernization and globalization, emphasises ongoing change and reconstruction. Gu Tao's ethnographic documentary trilogy—*Aoluguya*, *Aoluguya* (敖鲁古雅, 敖鲁古雅, 2007), *Yuguo and His Mother* (雨果的假期, 2010), and *The Last Moose of Aoluguya* (犴达罕, 2013)—offers vivid examples of this theory in action. His films depict the survival challenges and cultural identity crises faced by the Evenki people in northern China due to modernization. Corntassel's theory suggests that such crises are not just passive responses to external pressures but also reflect active resistance and cultural resurgence. Through his documentaries, Gu Tao captures both the anxiety and helplessness of the Evenki people while highlighting their efforts in cultural self-awareness, such as transforming traditional hunting skills into modern sports, demonstrating the agency and creativity in their cultural resurgence, as described by Corntassel.

According to Corntassel's (2003) "peoplehood" framework defines Indigenous identity through language, sacred history, ceremonial cycles, and land. In Gu Tao's documentaries, these elements are central to the portrayal and preservation of Evenki cultural identity and survival methods. His work illustrates how these cultural aspects sustain the Evenki community's integrity amid modern challenges. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's theory also provides an important framework for understanding Gu Tao's documentaries. Smith (2021) emphasises that Indigenous research should not only critique colonialism but also revive Indigenous knowledge systems and create cultural expressions distinct from Western hegemonic discourses. Gu Tao's visual narratives embody this by showing how the Evenki people pursue cultural autonomy and

reshape their identity in the face of modernization, aligning with Smith's notion of cultural resurgence and self-expression.

These theoretical frameworks have profound implications for my documentary practice. As a documentary filmmaker from Northeast China, it's essential to approach storytelling with cultural sensitivity. As Dorothy Christian emphasises, the land is both classroom and library; stories originate from and are shaped by the land, passed down through generations, and the land informs both language and identity (Archibald, 2019).

Contemporary Chinese ethnic minorities face the dual pressures of global cultural homogenization and Deterritorialization in constructing their cultural identities, making it difficult to sustain traditional cultures and local characteristics. As Zhao and Liu (2021) noted, the challenge for contemporary Chinese ethnic minorities lies in navigating their relationship with mainstream society within the political and ideological frameworks of the nation-state, striving for cultural autonomy and development space. Minority groups find themselves caught between the homogenizing forces of globalization and the need to position themselves within China's prevailing sociopolitical order.

Ethnographic Documentaries: Visual Sovereignty and Cultural Heritage

Visual sovereignty is a concept closely related to visual culture and aesthetics, yet it is rooted in broader considerations of sovereignty (Hughes, 2020, Christian, 2017, Raheja, 2007, pp.1159-1185). As Michelle Raheja states, visual sovereignty involves “how Native Americans assert their sovereignty and cultural identity through visual art” (Raheja, 2015). The concept of visual sovereignty as introduced by Jolene Rickard in 1995 and later elaborated upon by Michelle Raheja and Dorothy Christian, emphasising Indigenous cultural creators' self-expression and aesthetic control over

their imagery (Christian, 2017). This framework allows Indigenous communities to maintain cultural integrity and resist colonial narratives through their visual narratives and artistic expressions. Visual sovereignty ensures that Indigenous people have the right to tell their own stories, protecting their unique cultural identities and historical experiences in the context of modernization and globalization (Raheja, 2015). By incorporating this concept into ethnographic documentaries, filmmakers can challenge mainstream narratives and highlight the resilience and vitality of Indigenous cultures. This approach is crucial for promoting more nuanced and authentic portrayals of Indigenous communities, ensuring their voices and perspectives hold a prominent place in cultural and visual storytelling.

The documentary *The Last Shaman* (最后的山神, 1993) attempts to portray the unique belief system and cultural traditions of the Oroqen people by focusing on the life of their last shaman, Meng Jinfu. While it provides valuable insights into the community's spiritual practices, the film's approach risks perpetuating a romanticized and static representation of the Oroqen culture, trapped in the past and stripping it of its dynamic and evolving nature.

One significant issue is the documentary's simplification of shamanic beliefs through the tangible representation of the "mountain god" as a carved wooden figure. While visually striking, this symbolic approach reduces the complexity of shamanic spirituality, which lies not in the physical depiction of deities but in the performative connection between the shaman, nature, and the spiritual world. By emphasising static symbols over dynamic rituals, the documentary undermines the deeper essence of shamanic practices, which embody a profound understanding of animism and ecological interdependence. This narrative choice risks presenting the Oroqen belief system as a relic of the past, detached from its ongoing relevance to contemporary life.

Moreover, the film's framing of Meng Jinfu as the "last shaman" reinforces the trope

of a vanishing culture, portraying the Oroqen as a people on the brink of losing their heritage. While this dramatization may appeal to external audiences, it oversimplifies the cultural transitions experienced by the Oroqen and neglects the agency of younger generations in adapting and reinterpreting their traditions within a modern context. This binary narrative of “tradition versus modernity” overlooks the dynamic ways in which the Oroqen navigate modernization while maintaining cultural continuity. By romanticizing the older generation’s attachment to the forest and contrasting it with younger members’ pursuit of modern civilization, the film risks reinforcing the stereotype of Indigenous cultures as static and incompatible with progress.

The documentary’s reliance on external values undermines its ability to accurately represent the Oroqen. By celebrating qualities such as bravery, wisdom, and reverence for nature, it inadvertently imposes outsider values onto the community. While these attributes appear positive, they risk reducing the Oroqen culture to an idealized and exoticized image that serves the interests and imaginations of external audiences, rather than authentically reflecting the community’s lived experiences or self-perception. The film’s focus on Meng Jinfu as a heroic figure marginalizes the collective efforts of the broader Oroqen community in preserving and transforming their cultural identity, thus contributing to a narrative of cultural elitism.

From the perspective of visual sovereignty, Gu Tao’s work challenges the tropes of vanishing cultures and provides a platform for Indigenous voices to assert their narrative sovereignty. As Jolene Rickard points out, “visual sovereignty means that Indigenous artists and filmmakers have the right to present images and tell stories according to their cultural traditions, rather than merely catering to the expectations of mainstream society” (Rickard, 2011, pp.465-486). Gu Tao engages in documentary filmmaking with great cultural awareness and social responsibility. He strives to reshape collective memory, preserve cultural heritage, and defend ethnic dignity through the contemporary medium of film.

The narrative style and visual aesthetics of Gu Tao's documentaries reflects an aesthetic pursuit rooted in the cultural traditions of his people. For instance, his use of fragmented narratives, poetic shots, and authentic synchronous sound embodies the oral storytelling traditions of the Evenki people and their ecological wisdom of living in harmony with nature. As Michelle Raheja discusses, Indigenous films should open a practice of reading Indigenous visual culture through visual sovereignty, integrating the traditions represented by Indigenous communities with non-Indigenous filmmaking practices (Raheja, 2010). Gu Tao engages with the cultural and emotional complexities of the Evenki people through his sensitive portrayal of their lives and identities, exemplified by his focus on figures such as Weijia.

Weijia, one of the central figures in Gu Tao's work, reflects the struggles and transformations of the Evenki people in the face of modernization his life portrays the dramatic struggles of personal emotions and spirituality, while also reflecting the broader fate of the tribe amidst sweeping societal changes. Weijia deeply influenced by the Evenki's traditional forest culture, embodies the spiritual essence and artistic talent passed down from his shamanic lineage. However, his life was deeply affected by alcoholism and psychological distress, which Gu Tao presents not as mere personal struggles but as symptomatic of cultural loss and an identity crisis. As Weijia poignantly remarked, "A nation that loses its culture loses everything and faces extinction." This statement encapsulates not only his personal anguish but also the collective displacement and rootlessness of the Evenki people in the wake of modernization. Gu Tao's work exemplifies the principles of visual sovereignty, providing a platform for Indigenous voices while resisting the homogenizing and stereotyping tendencies often seen in external portrayals of Indigenous cultures.

Dorothy Christian emphasises that Indigenous filmmakers should "listen to Indigenous voices with openness, humility, and reflexivity, learn their land wisdom, and use film to build bridges of communication, exchange, and understanding between different worlds of life" (Christian, 2017, p.133). Gu Tao's approach to

filmmaking exemplifies these principles through his deliberate and respectful efforts to build trust with the Evenki people. He immersed himself in their daily lives, actively participating in their routines, such as sharing meals, drinking, and working alongside them. By living as part of their community, he dissolved the distance between filmmaker and subject, creating an atmosphere of familiarity and ease.

Gu Tao's spontaneous and non-intrusive filming style helped build trust with the Evenki people. He avoided imposing structured narratives, letting the camera follow the natural flow of their lives. He filmed when inspired and stopped when conditions, like fatigue or drunkenness, made it inappropriate, creating a relaxed environment that encouraged genuine interactions.

His long-term commitment also played a crucial role. Instead of brief visits, he lived with the Evenki for years, learning their rhythms, beliefs, and daily challenges. This consistent presence gradually dissolved barriers and fostered mutual trust. By respecting their customs, such as observing sacred space rules and reminding others to do the same, Gu Tao showed sensitivity to their traditions. Approaching his subjects with humility, he positioned himself not as a director but as an equal participant, following their lives without imposing his vision. This respectful, patient approach made the Evenki feel seen and heard, allowing them to share their stories freely.

In my documentary *Twilight over the Silent Hill*, by focusing on the deep emotional connections between the Indigenous people of Shifosi Village and their land, I aim to challenge mainstream society's perceptions of Northeast China ethnic minorities and highlight their cultural agency as guardians of this land. The oral stories of villagers Jiao Wanju and Zhang Shuyun weave together Shifos's sacred legends, ecological wisdom, and memories of resistance, reflecting the Indigenous land ethic of "coexisting with all things" (refer to Chapter 7). The documentary also uses close-up shots to capture the villagers' reverence and affection for the land during everyday practices such as autumn harvests and rituals, showcasing the emotional bonds

between people and nature. The films gaze upon village ruins, ancient wells, and sacred statues reveals the metaphorical significance of the land as a cultural landmark and spiritual home.

As Raheja asserts, visual sovereignty practices “allow Indigenous filmmakers and actors to re-examine, contribute to, draw from, critique, and reshape ethnographic film conventions, while operating within and expanding the boundaries set by these conventions” (Raheja, 2010, p.190). I have established long-term mutual trust with the Indigenous people of Shifosi Village, listening to their voices, learning from their land wisdom, and involving them in the construction of the narrative. This collaborative process itself empowers the Indigenous community to create and disseminate their knowledge. In the film, I critically assess my role as a scholar and creator, paying close attention to the power dynamics with participants and ensuring that Indigenous culture is neither objectified nor commodified.

For instance, while filming a funeral in the village, I became acutely aware of my position as an “outsider” and how my presence, despite having obtained consent, might still disrupt the sanctity of the occasion. This realization led me to pause and initiate a conversation with the villagers about whether to continue filming and how they wished their cultural practices to be represented on screen. Through these discussions, it became clear that certain moments of the ceremony were considered entirely personal or sacred for documentation. Respecting their wishes, I avoided filming those parts and instead allowed the villagers to guide the narrative, ensuring the portrayal aligned with their values and cultural integrity.

Ethnographic documentary as a practice of visual sovereignty holds significant cultural, ethical, and political implications in the contemporary context (Hughes, 2019, pp.160-174). It not only provides Indigenous communities with a platform to tell their own stories and highlight and preserve their land wisdom but also opens the possibility of cross-cultural dialogue between mainstream society and Indigenous

communities. This dialogue, based on “listening” and “reciprocity,” acknowledges the legitimacy of different knowledge systems and values, offering insights for reimagining the relationships between humans and nature, and between tradition and modernity.

Cultural Congruency Consistency, and Integrity: Ethical

Responsibility and Aesthetic Choices in Documentary Filmmaking

Practicing cultural consistency and relational ethics in documentary filmmaking is not just a research paradigm but a life practice and a spiritual pursuit (Petrarca and Hughes, 2014, pp.561-582, Willemien, 2010, p.528-553). Deeply rooted in Indigenous culture, we listen to the whispers of the land, engaging in our creative endeavours with openness, humility, and reflexivity. We strive to produce documentaries that reflect the essence of Indigenous culture while promoting understanding and dialogue between different groups (Lindala, 2023). This is not only the mission and responsibility of an Indigenous researcher but also the social duty of a documentary filmmaker.

I am dedicated to understanding and practicing ethnographic documentary filmmaking of Northeast China’s ethnic minorities from the perspectives of cultural consistency and relational ethics. As Dorothy Christian points out, cultural consistency means that the creator respectfully selects aesthetic elements such as language, imagery, sound, and colour to align with the cultural traditions and values of the Indigenous individuals or communities being filmed. This approach emphasises maintaining cultural expression in a coherent and consistent manner throughout the entire creative process, from pre-production to post-production. Rather than focusing solely on the final narrative outcome, cultural consistency ensures that every stage of the filmmaking process adheres to the standards of cultural representation, preserving the integrity and continuity of the community's traditions and values.

During the production of the documentary *Twilight over the Silent Hill*, I became deeply aware that the land of Shifosi Village is not only the physical setting of the film but also the spiritual home carrying the profound cultural memories and emotional attachments of the Indigenous community. The concept of cultural consistency proposed by Dorothy Christian (2017) has inspired me. She states:

“What I mean by this term, ‘cultural integrity’ is that the filmmaker is taking responsibility by engaging appropriate cultural protocols and respectful actions while being mindful of the different levels of accountabilities to the individual, family, or community being filmed.”
(p.14)

“From this understanding of Indigenous aesthetics and the visual sovereignty of images, I developed the concept of cultural congruency in relation to how visual narratives are constructed in Indigenous production practices.” (p.117)

Christian emphasises that the visual narratives in Indigenous filmmaking should align with the cultural traditions and values of the individuals or communities being filmed. In *Twilight over the Silent Hill*, I made several choices in narrative and visual style that resonate with the spirit of Indigenous culture. These include using empty shots and long takes to express respect for nature, presenting the villagers’ intricate interactions with the land through long takes and montage, and highlighting the cultural significance of viewing the land as sacred through symbols like temples and statues.

I draw upon the principles of cultural congruency, consistency, and integrity, recognizing that each concept serves a distinct but complementary role in Indigenous documentary filmmaking. As Dorothy Christian (2017) emphasises, cultural congruency refers to aligning visual narratives with the cultural traditions and values

of the Indigenous communities being filmed, ensuring harmony between storytelling and cultural aesthetics. Cultural consistency involves maintaining this alignment throughout the entire creative process, from pre-production to post-production, ensuring that cultural elements remain coherent and unaltered. Cultural integrity focuses on the ethical responsibilities of the filmmaker, emphasising respect for cultural protocols, accountability to the community, and a commitment to protecting the authenticity of cultural expressions.

These practices embody my commitment to Christian's principle of cultural consistency, reflecting both my cultural awareness as a creator and my respect for Indigenous communities. I prioritize relationality and ethical responsibility throughout the creative process, principles that consistently guide my work. As Shawn Wilson points out, for Indigenous peoples, reality is based on relationships and judging others' viewpoints is unimaginable. Therefore, egalitarianism and inclusiveness are inevitable epistemological outcomes (Wilson, 2004). This perspective has provided crucial guidance on how to interact with Indigenous communities in the field. During the several months of filming in Shifosi Village, I endeavoured to listen to and understand each villager's life story and viewpoints with an open and humble attitude, rather than judging them from a position of perceived superiority. I realized that the villagers' willingness to open and share with me stemmed from a relationship built on equality and respect.

Furthermore, Wilson emphasises (2020) that Indigenous research paradigms focus on how research establishes and deepens various relationships. The entire research process, from topic selection, methods, and analysis to presentation, should reflect relational responsibility, following natural and sacred laws, and respecting and strengthening connections with all things. This insight has led me to reflect on the responsibilities of a documentary filmmaker (Walukiewicz, 2021). In my work, I aim to build and strengthen relationships not only with participants but also with the land, the village's historical memory, and the cultural traditions passed down through

generations. This requires keen insight, humanistic care, and ecological ethics to capture the details of village life and convey the deeper cultural meanings within them.

Additionally, Wilson asserts that knowledge is not an entity to be owned but exists within relationships with all things (Wilson, 2008, pp.114-115). The research process must respect the knowledge guardians, such as elders, and obtain their consent and acknowledgment when quoting their wisdom, reflecting respect for the relationship with knowledge. This theory aligns closely with my experiences during interviews. While filming Zhang Shuyun's recounting of the village's ancient well legend, I strictly adhered to this principle, fully respecting her cultural customs and privacy boundaries. Only after gaining her trust and consent did I proceed with filming. Similarly, when presenting conflicts between villagers and the land, I carefully considered how to truthfully reflect reality while preserving the villagers' dignity and avoiding harm to individuals or the community. This is not only a requirement of research ethics but also a practical application of the responsibility to the knowledge relationship emphasised in the theory.

Conclusion

This chapter applies global concepts such as Deterritorialization and Indigenous theoretical framework to explore cultural expression and identity reconstruction in Northeast China. Building on the earlier theoretical discussions of Appadurai, Archibald, Smith, and Wilson previously, the focus here is on localizing these ideas within Northeast's distinctive cultural landscape.

By integrating Appadurai's Deterritorialization theory with Northeast's history, I demonstrate how modernization and globalization pressure ethnic identities, building on Shao Dan's insights into identity shifts. This approach highlights how global theories adapt to the local context, offering fresh perspectives on identity

reconstruction in Northeast China.

I also apply Archibald's "Storywork" theory to explore how oral histories preserve cultural memory and land-based identity among Manchurian ethnic groups, focusing on the role of storytelling. This extends Indigenous frameworks to deepen our understanding of identity formation in Northeast China. Additionally, I analyse Gu Tao's ethnographic films, which depict the cultural resilience of the Evenki people, illustrating how Indigenous methodologies, such as visual sovereignty and relational ethics, inform documentary filmmaking and help preserve ethnic identity. This chapter bridges global Indigenous theories with local practices, highlighting cultural expression and identity reconstruction in Northeast China while demonstrating how these frameworks inform both my research and documentary work.

Chapter 5

Identity on the Land: Land Reform and the Transformation of Indigenous Culture in Northeast China

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the findings from fieldwork in Shifosi Village, focusing on how land reform under the People's Republic of China reshaped Indigenous cultural identity and social structures. The research reveals that modernization and industrialization disrupted traditional practices and spiritual connections to the land, which have historically been integral to Indigenous identity. Through the lived experiences of Shifosi Villagers, this chapter uncovers the complexities introduced by land reform, including the challenges of adapting to socio-economic transformations while striving to maintain cultural continuity. Specifically, the findings highlight how storytelling, rituals, and daily practices serve as mechanisms for preserving cultural memory and reclaiming ties to the land in the face of rapid change.

Cultural Transformations Rooted in Land

In the context of globalization, territory and identity are undergoing significant transformations, particularly in Northeast China, where land and identity have shifted through the Qing Dynasty, Tsarist Russian and Japanese colonial rule, and the establishment of the People's Republic of China. However, globalization theories often neglect the unique relationship Indigenous peoples have with their traditional lands. Dorothy Christian criticizes this discourse for perpetuating neo-colonial frameworks, erasing Indigenous perspectives, and enabling corporate exploitation of Indigenous lands (Christian, 2017, pp.96-98). Appadurai's analysis of

Deterritorialization is critiqued for simplifying Indigenous cultures. Chowdhury highlights the limitations of these frameworks in addressing regional and national relationships (Chowdhury, 2005). while Dirlik emphasises that modernity, shaped by capitalist globalization, now reflects global cultural diversity rather than solely Euro-American dominance (Dirlik, 2002, pp.16-39).

Applying this theory to Northeast China, the transitions from the Qing Dynasty, through the Japanese occupation, to the founding of the People's Republic of China exemplify the processes of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization. With each shift in territorial control, from Qing rule to Japanese colonization to the establishment of new China, the land and its people experienced fragmentation and reconstruction of both territory and culture. Unlike Appadurai's theory, however, the Indigenous peoples of Northeast China were not entirely erased. Despite numerous challenges, their stories and cultures have persisted, reflecting a complex history of dispossession and renewal.

Within the Chinese academic discourse, there is a notable absence of an exploration of land issues from the perspective of Indigenous studies. Land has long been regarded as both a cultural foundation and a spiritual anchor for Indigenous communities, shaping their identities and ways of life (Acharibasam et al., 2024). In Shifosi Village, this connection is evident in oral traditions, daily practices, and community rituals. However, fieldwork reveals that land reform and modernization have disrupted these relationships in profound ways. Mechanized agriculture, driven by external contractors, has not only replaced traditional farming practices but also commodified land, transforming it from a shared cultural resource into an economic asset. Villagers, once stewards of their ancestral land, now find themselves paying fees to collect leftover peanuts after harvest, an example of how traditional communal access to land has been eroded. This shift exemplifies "Deterritorialization," where cultural practices become disconnected from their original contexts. The transition from collective farming to mechanized agriculture represents a loss of cultural

intimacy with the land, as economic imperatives overshadow spiritual and communal ties (Smith, 2005, pp. 93-95). Moreover, the act of scavenging leftover peanuts, while seemingly pragmatic, highlights the growing dependency on an externalized, profit-driven model of land use.

One villager expressed frustration over the lack of development in Shifosi, recalling stalled infrastructure projects from the 1960s that were derailed by Sino-Soviet tensions. This historical memory underscores a persistent tension between aspirations for modernization and the structural neglect of rural communities. Despite these challenges, Shifosi Villagers demonstrate resilience by maintaining rituals tied to Qi Xing Shan, a site imbued with historical and spiritual significance. These practices can be seen as acts of “Reterritorialization” where the community reclaims cultural identity and connection to the land through storytelling and ceremonies. The relationship between land and people in Shifosi Village reflects the broader complexities of modernity’s impact on Indigenous communities. While modernization offers economic opportunities, it often comes at the cost of cultural continuity, challenging communities to navigate a delicate balance between adaptation and preservation.

The Geographical Environment Evolution of Northeast: Impacts of Cultural Fusion and Political Transitions

The geographical environment of Northeast China has exerted a profound influence on its historical development. This region, characterized by major mountain ranges such as the Greater Khingan Mountains, Lesser Khingan Mountains, Chang Bai Shan, as well as significant river systems like the Songhua River, Heilongjiang River, and Liao River, has given rise to a favourable environment for fishing and hunting in the eastern areas and pastoralism in the western regions. This dichotomy has played a pivotal role in shaping the cultures of fishing and hunting, particularly evident in the Songhua River basin, and pastoralism, as exemplified by the grasslands of western

Greater Khingan Mountains, notably Hulunbuir (Shi, 2024).

Shi Zhan argues that the differences in the geographical environments on the eastern and western sides of the Greater Khingan Mountains influenced the formation of distinct ways of life among the inhabitants and had significant implications for Chinese history (Shi, 2023). For instance, the precursor of the Northern Wei dynasty, the Tuoba tribe, originated in Hulunbuir and later migrated south to what is now Inner Mongolia, where they integrated with the Central Plains agrarian society, eventually leading to the establishment of the Northern Wei dynasty. The formation of the Mongol ethnic group is also linked to the western regions of the Greater Khingan Mountains, while the Jin dynasty had its origins in the eastern part of the Greater Khingan Mountains. Therefore, the geographical diversity of Northeast China has made it a crucial melting pot of various ethnicities, profoundly influencing the rise and fall of ancient Chinese dynasties.

The formation of ethnic identity in Northeast China has been profoundly influenced by geography and environment. The Northeast, which includes Heilongjiang, Jilin, and Liaoning provinces, is rich in natural resources such as forests, rivers, and minerals. These resources attracted not only Han Chinese migrants but also other ethnic minorities, leading to a diverse population structure (Gamsa, 2020, pp.135-153). The rise of the Manchu people is closely tied to the geographical environment of the Northeast. The ancestors of the Manchu, the Jurchens, lived in the vast forests and river areas of the region, sustaining themselves through hunting, fishing, and gathering. In the late 16th century, Nurhaci unified the Jurchen tribes, establishing the Later Jin state and gradually expanding throughout much of the Northeast. After the Qing Dynasty was established, the Manchu regarded the Northeast as their ancestral sacred land, implementing strict management and protection policies to prevent excessive Han Chinese migration and exploitation (Schlesinger, 2012, p.46). Since the late Ming Dynasty, Han Chinese migrants gradually moved into the Northeast, especially during the late Qing period when policies were relaxed, leading to a diverse

population structure where Han Chinese coexisted with Manchus, Mongols, and other ethnic minorities (Gamsa, 2020, pp.153-161). These migrants brought agricultural techniques and culture, promoting interaction and integration among different ethnic groups. The Qing Dynasty's policies also significantly impacted the evolution of ethnic identity in the Northeast. To protect the Manchu homeland, the Qing implemented the "Willow Palisade" (柳条边) policy, restricting Han Chinese migration into the Northeast. However, over time, these policies were relaxed, and a large influx of Han Chinese migrants caused significant changes in the region's ethnic structure, with interactions and integration between Manchus and Han Chinese greatly shaping the ethnic identity of the Northeast (Schlesinger, 2012).

Nevertheless, the Northeast region did not quickly integrate with the Han culture of the Central Plains. In the early 20th century, Japan's colonization of the Northeast not only accelerated the integration of the region with the outside world but also further complicated the process of ethnic identity formation. Japan established various policies in Manchukuo to consolidate its rule through control and assimilation, affecting not only the relationships between Manchus and Han Chinese but also those of Mongols and other ethnic minorities (Gamsa, 2020, pp.87-107).

Despite its historical position on the periphery of politics and culture, Northeast China held a crucial place in modern and contemporary Chinese history. In 1644, the Manchus originated from the Northeast and entered the Central Plains, establishing the Qing Empire. The Qing rulers maintained the Northeast's "natural state" shaping the distinct Manchu spiritual homeland apart from Central Plains culture (Shi, 2022, pp.87-90). In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Northeast China became a focal point of international conflicts. The 1931 Mukden Incident led to the establishment of the puppet state of Manchukuo by Japan, with far-reaching historical consequences. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, Northeast China emerged as an industrial heartland, earning the title of the "Gong He Guo Zhang Zi." (Republic's

Eldest Son).⁴

From Homeland to Borderland: The Transformation of Manchu Identity

James Scott's work, *The Art of Not being Governed*, offers a unique perspective for interpreting the relationship between the lifestyles of ethnic groups in "border" regions and state governance. He emphasises viewing these ethnic groups from their Indigenous perspectives, challenging mainstream civilizational discourse that labels them as "barbaric" or "primitive." (Scott, 2009) Applying Scott's insights to Northeast China allows for a new understanding of land and identity issues in this region. The relations between the Manchu and other ethnic groups, as well as the relationships between Manchuria, the Republic of China, and Manchukuo, have historically reflected the binary opposition between civilization and wilderness. Over time, as representatives of the "primitive" in this land, the Manchu and their land and culture gradually became incorporated into a broader Chinese narrative.

The ideas of "civilization" and "wilderness" have long shaped the historical narrative of Northeast China, particularly in the transformation of Manchuria from the Qing Empire to modern China. During the Qing dynasty, the Manchu rulers implemented strict policies to preserve Manchuria as their sacred homeland, limiting Han Chinese migration and treating the region as a cultural and political stronghold. This reflected an attempt to maintain the "wilderness" as a symbolic and protected space, distinct from the "civilized" regions of China proper. However, this dynamic shifted dramatically during the era of the Japanese-controlled Manchukuo, where Japan portrayed Manchuria as an untamed frontier in need of modernization. Through large-

⁴ "Republic's Eldest Son" is a term used to describe Northeast China, reflecting its significant role in the early economic development of the People's Republic of China. Known for its heavy industries and rich natural resources, the region provided essential industrial support during the nation's early years, earning it this symbolic title.

scale industrialization projects, railway construction, and propagandist rhetoric “kingly paradise”, the Japanese reframed the region as a site of “civilization,” aligning it with their imperial ambitions. These contrasting narratives demonstrate how external forces, whether Qing policies or Japanese colonial strategies, utilized the duality of “civilization” and “wilderness” to assert control over Manchuria’s identity and land.

However, the processes of Reterritorialization are not straightforward. Shao Dan, for instance, argues that the land and identity in Northeast China have undergone multiple transitions between the Qing Dynasty, Japan, and the People’s Republic of China (Shao, 2011). During this process, Indigenous cultures and identities were redefined, both being included in China’s national narrative and challenged by Japan’s colonial narrative. This complex identity shift reflects the entanglement of globalization, modernity, and the relationship between state and land.

The cultural transformation of modernity brings unprecedented changes and challenges to any structure, this transformation has not only generated deep controversies and conflicts but has also sparked a series of philosophical and cultural discussions (Buzan and Lawson, 2015, Jacobsen, 2017). In the Chinese context, the distinctive “Indigeneity” reveals rich academic trends, cultural theories, and philosophical explorations in the context of transformation, as modernity in China has often been characterized by the tension between national integration, global influences, and local identities. Gladney highlights how minority groups are positioned within China’s national framework, where their cultural practices are simultaneously celebrated and exoticized as symbols of diversity (Gladney, 2004). This dynamic creates opportunities for the Hui Muslims, who navigate modernization by integrating into the national economy while preserving distinct traditions, such as their halal food practices. Uyghurs use music and art as mediums of cultural assertion, demonstrating how minority communities adapt to the dual pressures of globalization and state control.

Building on these historical and cultural dynamics, Zhang Yanshuo (2021) provides a more recent example with the Qiang people's response to the 2008 Sichuan earthquake. Through the reinvention of local myths, such as their connection to Qiang intellectuals reasserted their cultural identity within a state-supported framework of heritage preservation. This illustrates how indigeneity is not only a site of resistance but also a space for creative reinterpretation, aligning local identity with national narratives while retaining unique cultural features.

In Northeast China, the relationship between land and identity faces significant imbalances. Industrialization and modernization threaten Indigenous communities' traditional lifestyles, forcing them to assimilate into mainstream society. The influx of foreign cultures and values further challenges the cultural identity of these Indigenous groups, creating a complex web of issues. Using the example of the early 20th century Sino-Japanese rivalry over Manchuria, Japan emphasised the historical hostility between Manchu and Han ethnicities, claiming that Manchuria was vital to the lifeline of the Japanese Empire, asserting that Japan made a greater contribution to Manchuria's development, and, therefore, Japan had rights over it (Shao, 2011). China, on the other hand, highlighted the assimilation of Manchu into the Han ethnic group, arguing that Manchuria was on equal footing with other Chinese provinces, and Japan was violating Chinese sovereignty (Duara, 2003). Finally, the Lytton Report concluded that Manchuria had significantly assimilated into China, but both China and Japan were dissatisfied with the report's findings (Stevens, 1967, Kuhn, 1933, pp. 96-100). This historical case illustrates how both external powers and local authorities manipulate racial discourse, making Manchuria the victim of international contention.

It is essential to consider that James Scott delves into the concept of "Ethnogenesis" which explores how ethnic or tribal identities are formed and changed. Scott emphasises that, unlike traditional fixed and essentialist views, ethnic or tribal

identities are fluid and changeable. This implies that people can selectively change or adjust their ethnic identities based on social, political, and economic needs (Scott, 2009, p.251). This explains how Indigenous groups are unfairly treated in the discourse of globalization, as Appadurai's globalization discourse overlooks how Indigenous groups define their identities by sharing history, culture, and language. The diminishing distinctiveness of the Manchu as an ethnic group can be seen as a result of historical, cultural, and political developments over the 20th century. Urbanization and modernization, particularly in the first two decades of the People's Republic of China (1949–1960s), contributed significantly to the erosion of traditional Manchu customs and language.

By the early 1960s, many younger Manchus living in cities no longer spoke their ancestral language or practiced their unique cultural traditions, which weakened their sense of ethnic identity compared to older generations in rural areas (Shao, 2011, p.307). This trend was further compounded by a general reluctance among Manchus to publicly embrace their ethnicity, as reflected in the slower growth of registered Manchus during the early decades of the People's Republic of China. Zhou Enlai noted that the disappearance of the Manchu language had eased cultural integration with the Han majority, implying that efforts to revive it might not be practical (Shao, 2011, p.299). This situation may reflect broader global and national trends of Deterritorialization, where individuals and communities are increasingly detached from traditional geographic and cultural backgrounds. Ma Rong argues that people's group identity consciousness is a multi-layered system that extends from the smallest social unit (kinship family) to human groups (Ma, 2007, pp.12-38).

The Manchu people's historical experiences provide a unique perspective on the formation and transformation of group identity. In the early Qing Dynasty (1644–1722, from the conquest of Beijing to the end of the Kang xi (康熙) Emperor's reign), the Manchu people moved from their original habitats, such as the Heilongjiang River basin and other areas in Manchuria, to the Central Plains, where they lived alongside

the Han Chinese and other ethnic groups. This migration can be viewed as the Deterritorialization of the Manchu identity, as their identity transcended their original homeland and began to interact with a broader geographic and cultural context. However, given their distinct ethnic identity, military conquest, and strategies for maintaining separation from the Han majority, As the Qing Dynasty consolidated its power, particularly during the reigns of the Kang xi (康熙 1662–1722), Yong zheng (雍正 1723–1735), and Qian long emperors (乾隆 1662–1795), the Manchu people re-established close ties with the political center of Beijing. This marked a Reterritorialization process, in which the Manchus reasserted their identity in relation to specific places, particularly through the institutional framework of the Eight Banners.

The transformation of Manchu identity is a dynamic historical process shaped by specific political and social contexts. The Eight Banner system institutionalized the boundaries of Manchu identity, with culture, language, and lineage serving as key markers of self-recognition (Elliott, 2001). These boundaries, however, evolved in response to the political needs of the empire. From the mid-19th century through the collapse of the Qing in 1912, Manchuria transitioned from being the central “homeland” of the empire to a peripheral “borderland” of the state (Shao, 2011). In this process, Manchu identity shifted from that of rulers to a minority ethnic group reclassified by the state. The decentralization of their territorial claims, the redefinition of their ethnic identity, and the influence of political discourse reshaped the interactions between self-identification and external categorization.

This reconfiguration of identity reflects not only the role of state power in defining ethnic classifications but also the agency of the Manchu people in adapting to shifting historical contexts. Through continuous adjustment to the profound changes in political, social, and geographical conditions, Manchu identity was redefined under varying systems of power. The evolution of this identity was not a reaction to external forces but an outcome of the interplay between authority, culture, and territorial shifts.

While the question of whether the Manchu people should be considered “Indigenous” depends on the definition and criteria applied, their historical experiences of territorial marginalization, reclassification, and identity negotiation bear notable parallels to the experiences of many groups recognized as “Indigenous.” Thus, Manchu identity was not solely based on territorial connection but involved identification at multiple levels, including family, tribe, ethnicity, and nation. This dynamic identity formation reflects the unique position and historical experiences of the Manchu, offering a theoretical framework to better understand identity formation and transformation in other groups.

Loss and Recovery: A Complex Historical Narrative

The Japanese colonial rule was a pivotal period in the history of Northeast China, marked by the establishment of Manchukuo as a means of territorial expansion. Japan’s industrialization and modernization bringing technological and cultural innovations, while also causing significant ecological and social disruptions in the region (Shao, 2011, p.124). However, the history culture and identity of Manchu people gradually became incorporated into a larger Chinese narrative. A key element of this transformation was the political power the Manchu wielded at the center of the Qing empire, where they reshaped governance through a multiethnic imperial system that facilitated their own integration into a broader national identity. The Qing rulers sought to consolidate their rule through a multiethnic imperial system, rather than simply assimilating into Han culture. Instead of full-scale Sinicization, the Manchu implemented policies that facilitated a process better described as “Chinafication” (Zhong guo hua, 中国化), which involved redefining the empire’s structure and governance to align with emerging ideas of nationhood (Shao, 2011, p.16). By the late Qing, policies such as the 1909 Nationality Law formally redefined the Manchu, as “Chinese” (Zhongguo ren, 中国人), embedding them within a unified national framework.

In Northeast China, this complexity manifests in the relationships between the Manchu people and other ethnic groups, between Northeast China and other regions, and between China and other nations. As Appadurai pointed out, in the era of globalization, people's relationships with their homelands have become increasingly complex (Appadurai, 1996). In this context, the land and narratives of Northeast China have become focal points in struggles for identity and power. The Manchu people, as the Indigenous inhabitants of this land, attempt to maintain their rights to the land and their narrative authority. However, under the pressures of globalization and modernity, this struggle has become increasingly challenging.

The colonial rule imposed by both Imperial Russia and Japan had a profound impact not only on the land but also on the historical narratives of the Manchu people in Northeast China. Imperial Russia sought to incorporate the region into its empire, while Japan aimed to control it through the establishment of Manchukuo. These colonial powers disrupted the Manchu people's connection to their land, yet the process of Reterritorialization also involved Re-historicization. In the face of these disruptions, the Manchu engaged in reinterpreting and reshaping their historical narratives, using them as a form of resistance and identity reconstruction. In this context, this process of re-historicization, which involves the reinterpretation and reclamation of history as a means of cultural and political self-assertion, can be understood as a counter-hegemonic act embedded within the broader framework of Reterritorialization.

During the Republic of China era (1912-1949), the collapse of the Qing Dynasty placed the Manchu in a precarious position. Facing widespread anti-Manchu sentiment and political marginalization, many Manchu scholars sought to redefine their history to align with the emerging Chinese national identity. Many Manchu elites and intellectuals strategically emphasised their role in maintaining the Qing empire's multiethnic governance, integrating themselves into Republican-era narratives of

national unity (Rhoads, 2015).

Under Manchukuo (1932-1945), the Japanese colonial regime manipulated Manchu history to justify its control over Northeast China, presenting Manchukuo as a restoration of Manchu rule. However, Manchu intellectuals and officials reacted in different ways. Some actively collaborated, using the opportunity to reclaim a degree of historical agency, while others resisted the imposed narrative by stressing the distinctiveness of Manchu governance traditions rather than fully embracing Japan's pan-Asian ideology. Shao (2011) highlights that within this contested space, Manchu elites selectively engaged with Japanese narratives to assert their historical legitimacy, sometimes challenging Japanese claims of benevolent rule.

In the People's Republic of China (1949–present), Manchu identity underwent another transformation. The People's Republic of China officially recognized the Manchu as one of China's 56 minority groups, embedding them within a socialist framework that emphasised ethnic unity while downplaying their imperial past, the state's classification of the Manchu as a “minority” neutralized their previous political status and redefined them within the new ideological order. This period saw a Deterritorialization of Manchu identity, as historical narratives increasingly centered on class struggle rather than ethnic history, further complicating how the Manchu understood their own past.

Globalization and modernity further complicated this process, new forms of historical storytelling—such as the revival of the Manchu language, digital and media portrayals of Qing history, and the resurgence of local heritage studies—have provided fresh avenues for reclaiming historical agency. Shao (2011) discusses how contemporary Manchu scholars and cultural activists use these platforms to challenge long-standing nationalist narratives and reassert a distinct Manchu identity in ways that were previously constrained.

Territorial Transformations and Identity Recognition: Reflections in the Context of Globalization

The early twentieth century was marked the intricate transformations that characterized a distinctive historical period in Harbin, Northeast China, influenced by both Russia and China. These transformations extended beyond the realms of politics and economics, profoundly impacting cultural and societal structures. Throughout the ‘Deterritorialization’ and ‘Reterritorialization’ processes, territory functions not only as a material concept but also as a vessel for identity and culture. In the early 20th century, as Blaine Chiasson notes, the residents of Harbin and its surrounding areas experienced a series of significant political and cultural estrangements. The roots of this sense of alienation can be traced back to key historical events such as the construction of the Chinese Eastern Railway between 1897 and 1903, the Russo-Japanese War from 1904 to 1905, the establishment of Manchukuo under Japanese influence in 1932, and the brief Soviet occupation of the region in 1945 (Chiasson, 2011). These successive foreign dominations turned the Chinese residents of Harbin into marginalized “guests” on their own land, eroding their sense of identity. After enduring multiple shifts in foreign control, the people of Harbin began to seek ways to reconstruct their identity and cultural foundations. This pursuit transcended mere political and economic objectives, reflecting a deeper desire to preserve their culture and identity.

The shifting territorial boundaries necessitate a re-evaluation of one’s belonging and allegiance, as a group, although ‘imagined’ or ‘constructed,’ remains central to people’s lives and identities. Northeast China has historically been a region of multicultural coexistence. However, in history, it has witnessed multiple territorial disputes and transformations, especially during three distinct historical periods: the Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China, and the People’s Republic of China. During the

Qing Dynasty, Northeast China was regarded as the cradle of the Manchu people and the place of their origin. Nevertheless, with the expansion of the Qing Empire, this region gradually came under the centralized authority of the monarchy. Despite being politically integrated into the Qing Empire, Northeast China retained its unique geographical characteristics. In the era of the Republic of China' with Japan's aggression, Northeast China once again became the focal point of territorial disputes. The desires of both Imperial Russia and Japan for control over Northeast China turned this land into a geopolitical chessboard.

“Manchuria, with its vast and fertile land, abundant natural resources, and strategically significant location, held immense significance for both the Japanese colonial empire and the Republic of China. To safeguard Japan's ‘interest line’ extending beyond its territorial boundaries, Japanese leaders considered Manchuria as the nation's ‘lifeline.’ Consequently, the Japanese government allocated substantial manpower and national resources to protect Japan's interests in the region. Unlike the anti-Qing revolutionaries of the 1910s, Chinese nationalists in the 1930s and 40s argued that China would not be a complete nation unless it reclaimed the Northeast from Japanese occupation”. (Shao, 2011, p. 7)

Shao Dan explores how historical research is employed to interpret the relationship between Manchuria and China, ultimately substantiating or refuting the national status of Manchukuo. This entails a re-examination of Manchuria's position in China's national history. Reinterpreting and studying the history of Manchuria can unveil its role and status within Chinese history, thereby providing a historical basis for the national status of Manchukuo. Such historical research contributes to the understanding of Manchuria's significance in Chinese cultural and political identity and how it has influenced contemporary Indigenous culture in Manchuria.

“There are two questions concerning the national status of Manchukuo

and the tension between Japan's control of Manchuria and ethnic self-determination and harmony: How is historical research utilized to interpret the relationship between Manchuria and China and to substantiate or refute the national status of Manchukuo? How does sovereignty claim and ethnic rhetoric between China and Japan affect the region's former ruling group, the Manchus? The first question pertains to Manchuria's position in China's national history, while the second question concerns the international contestation between the two nations' proxies, redefining Manchu ethnicity and national identity, and redefining the territoriality of Manchuria". (Shao, 2011, p. 107)

This holds significant relevance for the study of contemporary Indigenous culture and land-related issues in Northeast China, as it underscores the complex historical and political status of the Manchurian region, factors that directly influenced subsequent identity policies of the post-1949 Chinese government towards the Manchu population in the Northeast. In-depth examination of the history during the Manchukuo period allows for a better understanding of cultural heritage and land utilization in the Manchurian region (Rogaski, 2022). Shao Dan's analysis of the predicament of Manchu identity during the Manchukuo era aligns with Scott's concept of communities in upland or other non-central areas choosing to distance themselves from centres of power to avoid domination (Scott, 2009). Particularly when faced with foreign forces such as Japan's and Russia's colonialism and aggression, they may opt for a degree of autonomy to safeguard their Indigenous culture, an attitude of voluntary distancing that may have influenced identity issues in this region.

This regional and Indigenous identity is further complicated in the light of Appadurai's argument that Deterritorialization in the context of globalization introduces new challenges for identity and narratives (Appadurai, 1996). However, within this framework, the land and stories of Northeast China not only face pressures for redefinition but also exhibit resistance to globalization and modernity. While

Appadurai's perspective of 'Deterritorialization', the redefinition of the Manchu offers insight into the redefinition of Manchu identity during the Manchukuo period, his discourse overlooks the existence of Indigenous populations, particularly the impact of mobile populations on Indigenous peoples residing in their traditional homelands. Appadurai (1996) mentions that those forcibly dispersed undergo a process of localization in their new places of residence, but he fails to provide a clear definition of this term and does not adequately address how this relocation affects Indigenous groups within modern nation-states. During the Manchukuo period, the Manchukuo regime sought to redefine Manchu identity to achieve its national and political goals, which can be seen as an example of Deterritorialization. However, following the 1931 Mukden Incident, Manchu individuals living within the territory of the Republic of China faced discrimination and suspicion, as they were perceived as potential loyalists to Manchukuo rather than the Republic of China (Shao, 2011, p.158). This is not only a result of Deterritorialization but also an illustration of the complex interplay between nation-state narratives and ethnic identity. As Shao Dan noted:

In 1937, a young Manchu student, Jin Qicong, attending an elementary school in Beijing, was mistakenly assumed to support the establishment of Manchukuo, despite his true sentiments. That same year, a petition cautioned the government that failure to recognize and value the Manchu population might push disillusioned Manchus to emulate those who had collaborated with Japan and joined Manchukuo. Even after Japan's surrender in 1945, suspicions persisted, as evidenced by the dismissal of a Manchu elementary school teacher solely due to their ethnicity. In 1947, Manchus living in Northeast China attempted to establish a local branch of the Association for Manchu Cultural Promotion, but their application was delayed and met with suspicion by authorities. (Shao, 2011, p.162)

Applying Appadurai's Deterritorialization and globalization perspective to examine this period of Northeastern history has limitations. Appadurai's theory primarily focuses on the impact of globalization on identity but does not fully consider the influence of factors such as nationhood and ethnicity on identity redefinition. While his works *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* and his journal article *Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy* provide essential research angles for understanding globalization, they overlook the perspective of Indigenous peoples. Christian offers a critical analysis of Appadurai's neglect of indigenous peoples from a local critique standpoint:

He constructs the "primary disjuncture" between the economic, cultural, and political as a way to interpret the existing centre-periphery model under the emerging global economy as a form of unorganized capitalism (Christian, 2017, p.95).

This implies that indigenous people are not only from certain places and belong to those places but are also in some way confined or restricted within those places. What needs to be examined is this attribution or assumption of confinement, imprisonment, or limitation. Why are some people perceived as being confined by their places? (Christian, 2017, pp.96-97)

During the Manchukuo era, national governments played a crucial role in attempting to shape the new identity of the Manchu people through policies and propaganda. The land reforms implemented by the People's Republic of China after its establishment not only altered land ownership and usage but also deeply affected the cultural identity of Indigenous populations and their relationship with the land (Chen, 2011). These transformations were not merely economic redistributions but profound social and cultural changes. The land reforms disrupted traditional ways of life and social structures within Indigenous communities, compelling them to adapt to the new socio-

economic framework. This highlights the continued significance of the state in the era of globalization, extending beyond the mobility of individuals and cultures emphasised in Appadurai's globalization discourse. While his theory is valuable in describing the flow of identity and locality, it inadequately considers power dynamics and their unequal impacts. Simultaneously, the Chinese land reforms in the context of globalization had profound consequences for Indigenous communities, challenging their cultural identity.

Reshaping Land, Power, and Identity: The Impact of Land Reform in Northeastern China

In the context of globalization, China's land reform has had a profound impact on the identity and land relations of indigenous peoples. Drawing on James Scott's idea that Indigenous peoples have often adopted strategic actions throughout history to avoid assimilation or control by the nation-state (as discussed in *The Art of Not Being Governed*), it becomes evident that in the framework of globalization and modern nation-states, this strategic space is shrinking. Appadurai's perspective on globalization further emphasises the complexity of cultural fluidity and identity construction, which becomes particularly apparent in the context of land reform.

The land reform carried out by the Chinese Communist Party was a key event in China's modernization process in the mid-20th century, was not merely a shift in economic policy. In fact, one of its central goals was to profoundly reshape social structures and cultural identities through economic reorganization, with wide-reaching consequences, particularly for Indigenous peoples. As Li Chunfang argues, the reform aimed not only to address rural land issues and secure support from minority communities but also to lay the groundwork for industrialization (Li, 2008). However, land reform was more than a process of economic redistribution; it was a deliberate social and cultural transformation.

For Indigenous peoples in Northeast China, the land reforms carried out by the Chinese Communist Party in the mid-20th century brought profound changes to their traditional way of life. According to Matthew Noellert, The Communist land reform campaign of 1946-1948 in Northeast China not only redistributed land ownership but also fundamentally restructured rural social relations. The subsequent agricultural collectivization movement (1953-1957) and the People's Commune period (1958-1978) further transformed Indigenous communities' relationships with their land (Noellert, 2020). As Dorothy Christian has pointed out, Indigenous peoples have deep spiritual, cultural, and ecological connections to the land (Christian, 2017, p.88).

These land reforms disrupted traditional connections, compelling Indigenous peoples to adapt to new socio-economic structures. Traditional communal land practices were replaced by collective ownership systems, while long-established hunting and gathering practices were largely abandoned in favor of agricultural production. This transformation not only changed patterns of land ownership but also disrupted social, cultural, and spiritual practices traditionally rooted in ancestral relationships with specific territories, as Indigenous communities had to adapt their traditional ceremonies and cultural expressions to fit within the new social and economic framework.

Traditionally, Indigenous communities relied on the land for self-sustaining agricultural production, where land served not only as means of production but also as the foundation of their culture and social organization (Donlon, 2018). However, during the land reform period, the PRC restructured rural social identities through specific policies and campaigns. After 1949, the state systematically redefined ethnic minorities as part of the broader peasant class, implementing policies such as the "Registration of Class Status" (成分登记) that categorized people based on their economic position rather than ethnic identity (Mullaney, 2011). This class-based transformation had significant impacts on Manchu communities in Northeast China, particularly in the way landownership was restructured to align with new class

categories.

As a key part of this identity reconfiguration, the land reform initiated by the Chinese Communist Party between 1946 and 1953 fundamentally reshaped the social structure of Manchu people. As Noellert (2020) argues, rural social structures before land reform were deeply intertwined with land ownership and political power. In regions such as Shuang Cheng County, where the Qing dynasty had historically allocated land under the Banner system, landownership was not only an economic resource but also a determinant of social status and governance authority. The Communist land reform dismantled these traditional hierarchies by confiscating land from former landlords, including many Manchu-descendant elites who had maintained political influence through their landholdings and administrative positions (Noellert, 2020, p. 78).

The restructuring of land ownership led to significant changes in the internal organization and power structures of Indigenous communities. The establishment of peasant associations and the redistribution of land weakened the authority of traditional elites, replacing them with new Chinese Communist Party aligned rural leadership. This shift not only altered local governance but also redefined social relations within Indigenous villages, as new political classifications (e.g., “landlord,” “rich peasant,” “poor peasant”) became more influential than ethnic or historical status in determining access to land and resources (Noellert, 2020, p. 115).

This restructuring of landownership and social relations had far-reaching consequences for many Indigenous communities in Northeast China. In this context Shifosi Village, located in the northern suburbs of Shenyang City, provides a concrete example of how land reform has impacted the lives and identities of Indigenous peoples. The history of Shifosi Village can be traced back to the Liao Dynasty (907-1125) (Liaoning Provincial Government, 2008), and later it has been a major gathering place for the Sibe ethnic minority. The village not only boasts abundant natural resources, such as the Liao River and Qi Xing Shan, but also preserves rich

historical relics and cultural traditions. However, as land reform has progressed, significant changes have occurred in the land relations and way of life in this area.

Prior to land reform, villagers engaged in agriculture not only for subsistence but also as an expression of cultural and spiritual life, consistent with Archibald's insight that for Indigenous people, land embodies a philosophy of coexistence with nature. As Archibald (2008) notes, for Indigenous people, land is not just a place for survival and production but a way of life, a philosophy of harmonious coexistence with nature. However, with the implementation of land reform, this relationship with the land has weakened. During the early phase of land reform (1950s), land was redistributed among villagers, reinforcing their connection to agriculture and the land. However, by the 1980s economic reforms, particularly with the introduction of the Household Responsibility System⁵, changes occurred. As mechanized farming expanded and rural labor demand declined, many young people began migrating to cities in search of industrial and service jobs (Oi, 1999, Huang, 1985). This shift led to an aging rural population, where elderly residents struggled to maintain traditional agricultural practices. In many cases, large expanses of farmland were leased to external contractors, who introduced modernized farming techniques, further distancing Indigenous communities from their traditional land-use practices. This phenomenon was also observed during my fieldwork in Shifosi Village, where many households had leased out their land to external entities, reinforcing the shift away from traditional agricultural practices.

China's land reform, particularly in Indigenous communities such as Shifosi Village, has not only altered land ownership and usage but also impacted the cultural identity and relationships Indigenous peoples have with the land (Chen and Davis, 1998,

⁵ The Household Responsibility System was an agricultural reform policy implemented in China in the late 1970s and early 1980s as part of the broader economic reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping. Under this system, farmland, while still collectively owned, was contracted out to individual households, granting them autonomy over agricultural production. Farmers were required to meet state quotas and collective obligations, but any surplus could be sold on the market, incentivizing productivity and significantly improving rural livelihoods. (Lin, 1988)

pp.123-137). This transformation encompasses economic, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, yielding far-reaching and complex consequences for Indigenous communities. Land reform has not only redistributed land ownership but also significantly changed Indigenous people's ways of life, cultural identities, and social structures. Against the backdrop of globalization, these changes have become more intricate and diverse, posing challenges for Indigenous communities. While land reform has addressed certain aspects of land inequality, it has also introduced profound social and cultural transformations, bringing new challenges and adaptation issues for Indigenous people.

Chapter 6

Echoes of the Northeast: Dialogues with Indigenous Visual Storytellers

Chapter Overview

Based on the exploration of how land reform disrupted Indigenous connections to land and identity in the previous chapter, this chapter shifts focus to the stories and visual narratives that preserve and reflect these cultural ties. In the process of exploring the rich and diverse cultural landscapes of Northeast China, I engaged in deep conversations with visual storytellers and filmmakers who live and create on this land. These dialogues were not just simple exchanges but a profound sharing of knowledge and experience. While writing the chapter *Identity on the Land*, I brought back the insights, stories, and cultural expressions deeply connected to this land from these conversations. This process not only allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the visual culture of the Northeast China but also deepened my comprehension of how to narrate and protect the stories of this land through visual arts.

This chapter has two primary objectives. To begin with, I intend to showcase the shared knowledge, stories, dialogues, and experiences collected from local artists and indigenous people. These contents have not only enriched my research but also provided unique perspectives for understanding the cultural identity and ethnicity of the Northeast region. In addition, I apply the principles of the Indigenous “Storywork” process proposed by Jo-ann Archibald (2008) to the knowledge in my interviews. By doing so, I aim to reveal which elements can authentically represent the visual culture of the Northeast China when discussing cultural stories and the relationship with the land.

Through this chapter, I hope to offer readers an in-depth perspective to understand the unique culture, history, and social phenomena of the Northeast region. By showcasing the stories and experiences of visual narrators and filmmakers, I have presented the cultural identity and ethnicity deeply connected to this land, while also exploring how to maintain cultural heritage and seek transformation in the process of modernization.

Shared knowledge: Integration of Stories and Experiences

The core purpose of Indigenous research methodologies is decolonization and the restoration of Indigenous peoples' control over their own knowledge and culture. Archibald emphasises that Indigenous scholars integrate research with their unique perspectives and formulate theories derived from their cultural beliefs to ensure that their investigations have significant relevance and practicality for their communities. The method of Indigenous "Storywork" is an example of this methodology, as it foregrounds the principles of exchanging, honouring, and cherishing our narratives, which are central to Indigenous values (Archibald, 2019, pp.17-18). This methodology is not simply developed from the Western theoretical system. It represents both an epistemological and ontological response by Indigenous communities to colonial history. From an epistemological perspective, Indigenous knowledge systems are coherent and internally structured. From an ontological perspective, these systems should be recognized as legitimate and equal to Western knowledge systems, asserting their rightful place in the global landscape of knowledge. It originates from Indigenous communities' profound reflection and redefinition of their own knowledge systems, cultures, and identities. Thus, simplifying Indigenous research methodologies as a part of the Western knowledge system not only disregards their profound political, cultural, and social significance but also reinforces the colonial legacy of using Western science as a tool of domination. Western science, often seen as neutral and universal, has historically wielded political-discursive power to marginalize Indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous methodologies are, therefore, not just academic practices but acts of

resistance, reclaiming intellectual and cultural autonomy in the face of this historical hegemony.

In this context, I did not present the shared cultural information, experiences, and stories as data or findings but used the concept of shared knowledge to describe the cognitive process and method I employed in completing this project. “Shared knowledge” was introduced and developed by social psychologist and linguist Herbert H. Clark and Deanna Wilkes-Gibbs in their 1986 study. In their paper “Referring as a collaborative process,” Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs explored how communicators collaborate through common knowledge and understanding to achieve effective communication (Clark and Wilkes-Gibbs, 1986). This concept later became a cornerstone in the study of communication and language use in cognitive science, communication studies, social psychology, and other fields. Shared knowledge/collective knowledge broadly refers to the knowledge, beliefs, and experiences held in common by participants in a certain social, cultural group, or conversation.

Christian (2017) elevated the concept of shared knowledge to a new level. She did not view the shared cultural information, experiences, and stories as data or discoveries but presented them as “shared stories/dialogues/experiences.” This is not merely a change of terms but encompasses a recognition and action mode of completing work. Her approach aims to help readers attribute meaning and understanding to the information in shared stories, which is more culturally consistent and aligns with the Indigenous research paradigm, reflecting respect for knowledge keepers and responding to responsibility.

In my research, I drew inspiration from Christian’s approach, exploring and understanding the formation and application of shared knowledge through the analysis of interview materials. Shared knowledge here serves not just as a research tool but also as a window into the Indigenous cultures, traditions, and perspectives of the

Northeast. These interview materials offer deep insights into the relationships between Indigenous people and the land, cultural practices, and visual expressions, enabling me to establish an understanding of these elements on a shared foundation of knowledge. Through the lens of shared knowledge, it is possible to uncover and learn how Indigenous people express complexity and multidimensionality in their lives, arts, and cultures. As Wilson emphasises the importance of relational research, reciprocity, and process in Indigenous studies, it reveals that knowledge is not merely the simple transmission of information but is produced, shared, and maintained within complex networks of interpersonal and human-nature relationships (Wilson, 2008).

This relational perspective underscores that effective knowledge sharing should flow in both directions, not only bringing insights to the researcher but also delivering tangible benefits to the participating community, respecting its culture, values, and right to self-determination. Furthermore, Wilson's emphasis on the importance of the research process reminds me that the process of sharing knowledge itself is equally important. This process involves deep engagement with the community, establishing dialogues of trust and respect, and ongoing collaborative learning. This comprehensive understanding of shared knowledge not only promotes cultural understanding and community development but also offers a more respectful and effective model for knowledge exchange between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Shared knowledge is not just about documenting and spreading existing information; it is a living process that deepens cultural understanding through the integration of individual and collective stories and experiences (Seaton, 2008, pp.293-305).

Therefore, using Shared Knowledge to analyse interview information in my research is not only reasonable but necessary. It allows me to interpret and share these valuable pieces of knowledge and experiences in a respectful and responsible manner. It emphasises the symbiotic nature of knowledge, where individual experiences, stories, and perspectives interweave, collectively forming a richer and deeper cultural

understanding (Holler and Wilkin, 2009, pp.267-289). In my research, this means treating each person's perspective as a distinctive contribution to the overall understanding, rather than simplifying it into quantifiable data points. As Archibald stated:

“Constructing holistic meaning requires the engagement of mind, body, spirit, and emotion, recognizing the relationships between self, family, community, environment, and broader society. Storytelling within a research context provides participants with the time and space to share relevant stories. The process of meaning construction continues as researchers understand the interconnections between Indigenous peoples, their stories, and the history, politics, culture, etc., of their communities. Developing and sharing these narrative understandings require researchers to collaboratively use appropriate Indigenous “Storywork” principles. Such sharing may also inspire reflection in listeners or readers.” (Archibald, 2019, p.16)

Archibald's elaboration on the construction of shared knowledge aligns closely with my understanding. Archibald's approach integrates heart (emotion), intellect (rationality), body (physical action), and spirit (spirituality), creating a holistic perspective that encompasses the individual, family, community, land/environment, and broader society. This resonates with the dynamic cognitive process of shared knowledge I describe, where individual experiences, stories, and perspectives interweave to form a richer and deeper cultural understanding.

Archibald's principles of holism, interrelatedness, and synergy create space for meaningful interaction among research participants, researchers, and community members to share and listen to life experiences and traditional stories. This aligns with my emphasis on providing time and space for narrating stories related to the research context. Developing, sharing, and presenting these narrative understandings through

collaborative action and the application of appropriate Indigenous “Storywork” principles is crucial. Such sharing can enrich my own understanding and inspire new ideas and understandings in the audience or readers of the stories. I believe Archibald’s perspective highlights the value of individual and collective experiences and reminding us to understand and present cultural knowledge in a more comprehensive and profound way, as she states “the principles of holism, interrelatedness, and synergy created space for meaningful interaction among research participants, researchers, and community members to share and listen to life experience and traditional stories.” (Archibald, 2019, p.90)

Therefore, I regard each individual’s perspective as a unique contribution to overall understanding, rather than merely reducing it to a quantifiable data point. I hope that through this approach, I can present to the academic community and broader society a richer and more diverse picture of the Indigenous visual culture of Northeast China. In this way, I attempt to capture the complexity and multidimensionality of the Indigenous visual culture of Northeast China. For example, when analysing the photographic works of my graduate supervisor, Professor Liu Lihong, I focus not only on the technical details of his works or the personal background of the artist but try to understand the significance of the photograph in the social and cultural context of the time, and how it connects to the local people’s life experiences and stories. His guidance has been instrumental in shaping my early academic and artistic exploration in photography. Reflecting on his approach, he remarks:

“...the expression of authenticity, especially through the capture of character expressions and gazes, as well as the subtle adjustments in colour grading and flash usage, to convey deep emotions and stories. The influence of the regional environment on the artist’s character and the style of the works, reflecting the importance of the unique cultural characteristics and background of the Northeast region in artistic creation.” (Liu Lihong, Personal communication, Translated by Zhang

Hengtai, September 2023)

Through Professor Liu Lihong's perspective, I gained a deep understanding of the profound impact of the regional environment on artistic creation and how subtle technical adjustments can convey authentic emotions and stories. This not only enriched my understanding of his works but also deepened my appreciation of the importance of the unique cultural characteristics of Northeast China in visual art.

Furthermore, the method I adopted places particular emphasis on the power of dialogue and storytelling. Through in-depth conversations, I am able to understand how knowledge keepers view their cultural heritage and how these heritages play a role in their community and identity. The stories I document are not merely narratives of individual events; they are testimonies of cultural continuity and change, the result of the interweaving of personal and collective memories. In this process, I have come to realize profoundly that this research method is not only applicable to Indigenous cultures but is also suitable for exploring and expressing the deep knowledge of any culture. And it provides a perspective different from the traditional Western scientific method, which views knowledge as co-created and continuously developed by communities. As Christian mentioned:

...because I am a part of the community I am researching and actively participating in the process of contemporary Indigenous knowledge production.

...that includes my emotional reactions/responses that I experienced in finding my 'sense of place' on the land, within my own family, home community and Nations. (Christian, 2017, p.16)

I engaged in a series of meaningful dialogues with participants, which were carefully designed according to their cultural customs and personal preferences. For example, when interviewing elderly Sibe community members in Shifosi Village, I followed

traditional conversational etiquette by allowing them to take the lead in storytelling, demonstrating patience, and avoiding direct interruptions, as it is considered respectful in their oral traditions. For the participants, those engaged in contemporary artistic practices, I adopted a more informal and flexible approach, when discussing their work in casual settings such as participants' studios or coffee shop, rather than formal interview environments. This allowed for a more natural and open exchange of ideas.

Christian's viewpoint emphasises the importance of the researcher's participation and emotional investment in the community, which is crucial for understanding and documenting cultural heritage. She also highlights that the researcher's sense of belonging and emotional reactions influences the depth and authenticity of the research, underscoring the need to remain sensitive to the context and cultural nuances of the stories. When documenting stories, I endeavoured to preserve the contextual background of each story, ensuring that the narratives remained true to their original storytelling and environmental context. Moreover, in analysing these stories, I used citations to support my analysis while being mindful to maintain the integrity and multidimensionality of the stories.

In the following section of this chapter, I have quoted longer passages from interviews to preserve information consistency and respect the original form of the oral information, which is often challenging to achieve in written academic research. Respecting the tradition of oral storytelling aligns with the Indigenous research paradigm I have adopted. This approach employs a "conversational participation" method, whose primary aim is to help others understand the concepts under discussion through story sharing, concepts that are usually embedded within the narratives (Kovach, 2010, pp.40-48). By presenting cultural information in this way, I express deep respect for the knowledge shared and assume a certain responsibility towards those who have shared their stories with me.

In my thesis, I am committed to presenting a more holistic perspective, not merely elucidating individual knowledge points but showing how these pieces of knowledge are formed within specific cultural and social environments, and how they interact and affect one another. This also means a rethinking of research methodologies and the researcher's role, advocating for a humbler and more open attitude towards understanding and applying knowledge, because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position (Smith, 2018). Through this method, I hope to present to the academic community and broader society a richer and more diverse picture of the Indigenous visual culture of Northeast China.

Bridges of Knowledge: Connecting Indigeneity and Modernity

The relationship between modernity and Indigenous identity in Northeast China is complex, reflecting significant cultural transformations (Shi, 2011, pp.91-96). Ethnic identities, like the Manchu, evolved through various regimes (Qing Dynasty, Manchukuo, Republic of China, and People's Republic of China) and foreign influences (Japanese and Russian invasions). These changes impacted both the material lives and cultural identities of Indigenous communities, affecting traditional knowledge transmission (Shao, 2011). In conversations with visual storytellers and filmmakers from Northeast China, I found contradictory connections between modernity and Northeastern ethnicity. These discussions supported my previous analysis of modernity and local identity, and the fragmentation and representation of Northeastern culture in globalization. These talks highlighted the complexity of traditional culture and historical changes, and the regional environment's impact on artists' styles. Through these stories, I understood the origins and challenges of Northeastern visual elements and cultural heritage. For example, in my documentary, I explore how the Indigenous inhabitants of Shifosi understand land and their relationship with the government regarding land rights. Zhang Suyun shared,

“Land is not only the basis of life but also a part of the collective memory we share with our ancestors. My relationship with the land is deeply embedded in our daily lives and cultural traditions. For us, the land is not just an object of cultivation but the mother who has nourished generations. In recent years, the government has implemented many reforms and policies aimed at protecting the interests of villagers like us, ensuring that we can fairly share the benefits brought by land resources. The abolition of agricultural tax and the provision of subsidies to farmers over 60 have significantly reduced our burden of living. However, not everything is harmonious, as sometimes the decisions on land development and use conflict with the interests of the villagers. For instance, some lands are leased out to outsiders, or requisitioned for development projects, situations that sometimes leave us feeling helpless and worried.” (Zhang Suyun, Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, November 2023)

Through the conversation with Zhang Suyun, I understood the importance of land in the culture of Northeast Indigenous peoples and its complex relationship with national policies. Land is not only the foundation of their lives but also a part of cultural transmission and collective memory. Although government reforms have somewhat alleviated their living burdens, conflicts of interest in land development decisions still exist, causing them distress. These personal stories reflect the real challenges and contradictions faced by the Indigenous peoples of Northeast China in cultural preservation and development amid globalization and modernization processes. For instance, In Shifosi large-scale quarrying over the past two decades has driven economic growth but disrupted the natural landscape and traditional way of life. This has also shaped the current appearance of Qi Xing Shan

The stories and insights from the interviews allowed me to delve into the relationship

between Indigenous identity and globalization, including the role of new technologies in preserving and transmitting Northeastern culture. The transmission of Indigenous knowledge faces challenges in the process of modernization and globalization, as traditional ways of life, languages, and cultural practices are suppressed or marginalized (Smith, 2021, p.38, Archibald, 2008, p.211, Christian, 2017, pp.59-68). In Northeast China, this process of suppression and marginalization is often linked to nationalism, and the pursuit of modernity. For example, the modernization efforts during the Manchukuo period aimed to construct a new national identity, which often involved reshaping or neglecting Manchu traditional knowledge and culture. The ethnic policies and Cultural Revolution after the establishment of the People's Republic of China also had profound effects on the traditional knowledge and cultural practices of the Manchu and other ethnic groups in Northeast. As Shao Dan discussed:

During the 1950s, the Chinese Communist Party redefined the Manchu identity, aiming to distinguish them from the Qing dynasty rulers. In 1956, the State Council banned the term "Manchu-Qing" to promote ethnic unity. Zhou Enlai played a key role in affirming the Manchu as a distinct nationality, despite their linguistic assimilation. Ethnic identity was not solely defined by language and noted that multiple cultural elements, such as the qipao and certain Chinese words, originated from Manchu traditions. (Shao, 2011, p.204)

This reflects the fluid nature of Manchu identity, where individuals adapted their self-perception based on social and political conditions. In earlier decades, many Manchus concealed their ethnicity to avoid discrimination, while in the late 20th century, a resurgence of ethnic awareness led to a significant increase in those identifying as Manchu, including individuals with minimal ancestral ties. This shift illustrates how ethnic identity can be influenced by broader societal changes and evolving notions of heritage and belonging. This aligns with Patrick Fuliang Shan's concept of Elastic Self-consciousness, which suggests that identity suppression in one period can

transform into a conscious revival in another, as seen in the significant rise of Manchu self-identification in the 1980s and 1990s (Shan, 2015).

In my interviews with Northeastern artists, filmmakers, and Indigenous people, I felt that they shared profound insights about Northeastern culture through their art and creative processes. Their works are not just visual presentations but are collections of their experiences and stories, which reflect their deep connections with the land, history, and community. From this perspective, the visual culture and identity of the Northeast region share commonalities with Indigenous knowledge systems and narratives. It deeply reveals the close connection and consistency between the modernity of contemporary Northeast and the Indigeneity of traditional Northeast. Through the description of the mixed cultural background of ethnic minorities and the Han in the Liaodong area, Dai Wenqiang showcased the diversity of Northeastern culture and its capacity to absorb foreign cultures. This openness and inclusiveness of culture are important characteristics of Northeastern modernity, which also preserves the uniqueness of Northeastern local culture. Dai Wenqiang said:

“...The tradition of people carrying valuable items on their person is not only a lifestyle but also a form of cultural expression, reflecting the boldness and straightforwardness of Northeastern culture. This style of dress demonstrates how Northeastern culture maintains its local characteristics amidst modernity, showing a cultural confidence and respect for traditional values.” (Dai Wenqiang, Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, October 2023)

“...The Korean ethnic group’s culture has been relatively well preserved, while the Manchu ethnic characteristics have almost disappeared, reflecting the cultural changes and adaptations in the Northeast region in the face of modernization. The modernity of the Northeast does not mean completely abandoning tradition but rather seeking identity and

cultural continuity through integration and change.” (Dai Wenqiang, personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, October 2023)

Dai Wenqiang’s observations highlight the cultural diversity of Northeastern China, where ethnic traditions intersect with modern influences. He points out that practices, such as carrying valuable items, reflect the bold and straightforward character of Northeastern people, demonstrating how the region maintains its local traits despite modern changes. Dai also contrasts the cultural preservation of the Korean and Manchu ethnic groups, noting that while Korean culture remains distinct, Manchu traditions have largely faded. This reflects the region’s complex relationship with tradition and modernization, showing its openness to foreign influences while striving to preserve Indigenous heritage.

The core of cultural revival, whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, is the restoration and respect for the knowledge system of that culture (Kovach, 2009, p.12). This is consistent with Song Xingyuan pointed out the confusion surrounding the concept of ethnic respect. He stated:

“The China’s ethnic minorities have its unique cultural traditions, but under the impact of contemporary social transformation, many ethnic groups face an identity crisis. Taking the Yi ethnic (彝族) people as an example, their ancient mountainous way of life has been disrupted, forcing them to descend into modern society, resulting in a loss of direction, and serious issues with drugs and poverty. Tibetans face a similar plight, where the nature of civil service work dilutes their ethnic beliefs, leading to their disengagement from work and alcohol abuse. The rise and fall of industrialization in the Northeast have also brought about a collective sense of nostalgia among its people.” (Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, December 2023)

“The root of these issues lies in the weakening and disintegration of traditional senses of identity and values. Merely indulging in nostalgia is futile. Ethnic minorities need to find a new communal identity that adapts to contemporary society based on self-identity, to emerge from these predicaments. Preserving traditional culture while learning to adapt and integrate into modern civilization is the essential path for the sustainable development of ethnic minorities.” (Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, December 2023)

The concerns raised by Song Xingyuan reflect the critical challenge in modern society of balancing the preservation of traditional culture with the formation of new communal identities, which is essential for the sustainable development of ethnic minorities. Dwelling on the past cannot solve the problem. Song Xingyuan believes that ethnic minorities should undergo active transformation to establish new identities that are compatible with contemporary society, thereby overcoming their predicaments. This aligns with the discussion in my third chapter. From the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, the Indigenous peoples of Northeast China experienced processes of Deterritorialization and Reterritorialization, revealing unprecedented challenges that modernity posed to local culture and identity. During this period, industrialization and modernization not only compelled Indigenous peoples to protect their culture and identity but also required them to adapt to the influences of mainstream society and foreign cultures (Shao, 2011). This reflects the ongoing impact of the tensions between globalization, modernity, and state power on Indigenous peoples.

Zheng Jinling’s interview further emphasised that the subtle opposition between modernity and locality still exists among contemporary ethnic minorities. She discussed her self-awareness as a member of the Korean ethnicity in Northeast China and how the Korean community adapts and survives in different cultural and social environments. She also explored how ethnic minorities experience marginalization in

both history and contemporary society and strive for a louder voice and recognition by emphasising their culture and identity, thus facing the challenges of modernity while maintaining their ethnicity.

“In terms of family or history, I am definitely not an Indigenous person. Why? Because both my grandparents’ sides immigrated from the Korean Peninsula to here” (Zheng Jinling, Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, August 2023).

“As a member of the Korean ethnicity, in a Western context, we are considered an ethnic minority. I have discussed with my husband that although we are minorities, we also have our advantages. We realized early on that we could not become the mainstream ethnicity or ruling class, which allows us to observe the society and environment we are in as outsiders. Another advantage is that we might find it easier to adapt to other cultures and environments. For example, we can boldly choose to live in the United States or Europe. I believe that this courage might be more prevalent among our ethnicity than the mainstream ethnicities. For me, wherever I am, I am willing to try and adapt, and I never consider myself part of the mainstream culture, which makes me more adaptable.” (Zheng Jinling, personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, August 2023)

“The relationship between ethnic minorities and the mainstream culture is about mixing them together... We are all ethnic minorities, we are all mixed together, and within ethnic minorities, there is mainstream culture; within mainstream culture, there are ethnic minorities” (Zheng Jinling, personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, August 2023).

The interview with Zheng Jinling reveals the challenges and opportunities faced by ethnic minorities like the Korean ethnicity in the context of globalization and modernization. Locality, as a key factor in maintenance of Indigenous culture and identity, plays a fundamental importance for ethnic minorities. This is not only because locality provides them with a unique way of life and worldview, but also because it is the cornerstone for resisting the impact of modernity, maintaining identity, and ensuring cultural continuity (Ma, 2010, pp.6-18).

Although the Korean ethnicity in Northeast China is not considered Indigenous, they share similar experiences with Indigenous peoples in terms of cultural preservation and identity maintenance. The Korean community strives to preserve their language, traditions, and customs amidst the pressures of assimilation and globalization. By emphasising their ethnic culture, they seek to strengthen their community bonds and assert their place within the broader societal framework.

The advancement of modernity introduces new cultural elements, lifestyles, and values, exerting pressure on ethnic minorities to adapt and integrate. In this context, advocating for ethnic minorities from an Indigenous perspective is not only a maintenance of their locality but also a response to the challenges of modernity (Christian 2017, p19). Wilson emphasises the central principles of reciprocity and process in conducting Indigenous research, which guide the exploration of how modernity affects Indigenous identities. Wilson's principle of relationality reminds us that the culture and identity of ethnic minority communities are formed and maintained in their relationships with others, the natural environment, and the spiritual world (Wilson, 2008, pp.80-96). In the backdrop of globalization and modernization, maintaining these relationships is crucial for protecting the cultural heritage of ethnic minorities and promoting their identity. This requires us to focus not only on interpersonal interactions but also on the relationship between humans and the environment when supporting these communities. Wilson stated:

“For Indigenous communities, identity is deeply rooted in their connections to the land, their forebears who have merged back with the earth, and the descendants who will emerge from it. Instead of perceiving ourselves as merely linked to other individuals or entities, we embody and contribute to the network of relationships we are entwined in.” (Wilson, 2008, p. 80)

The principles of reciprocity and responsibility emphasise the need for a bidirectional, reciprocal exchange and cooperation in supporting ethnic minority communities. This means that any project or research aimed at supporting these communities should not only derive knowledge and information from the community but also ensure that these activities bring tangible benefits to the community, such as enhancing cultural pride, promoting economic development, or improving the community’s self-determination capabilities.

I aim to demonstrate the necessary degrees of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility in sharing this research narrative. Until now, I’ve discussed how Indigenous ontology and epistemology embody relational principles and argued that Indigenous methodology and axiology should adhere to the concept of relational accountability. I’ve explored the significance of relationality and plan next to delve more deeply into the concept of relational accountability. Fundamentally, this means that the methodology should be grounded in a community context (emphasising relationality) and must display respect, reciprocity, and responsibility. (Wilson, 2008, p98)

The principle of the importance of process reminds me that the process of supporting ethnic minority communities is equally important, and this process should be inclusive, participatory, and built on a foundation of trust and respect. This approach encourages ongoing interaction, dialogue, and cooperation with the community,

ensuring that community members can actively participate in decision-making processes related to the preservation of their culture and identity.

Stories of Land and People: Memories Rooted in the Northeast

Land plays a pivotal role in my research, as emphasised in the introduction and the first chapter, with one of the exploration goals being “to give voice to the land and its stories.” Land is crucial to my practical research, serving not just as a geographical backdrop but as the cornerstone that carries Indigenous communities’ cultural narratives (Christian 2017, p. 149). This explains why it is particularly important to discuss with research participants their understanding of the connection between land and stories. For many Indigenous peoples, Indigenous communities’ territories are dotted with landmark landscapes that are not only the physical presence and proof of our stories but also concrete symbols of our connection to the land, considered sacred spaces. However, for non-Indigenous people, these significant landmarks may seem merely as tourist spots for photo opportunities. These special land features are, in fact, records of the oral traditions left by our ancestors on the earth.

Since September 2023, I have begun making regular trips to Shifosi for shooting, a location approximately one hour drive from my home. I chose Shifosi as my documentary filming site because it is situated in a traditional northern village far from the city, preserving rich history and diverse ethnic cultures. Compared to modernized cities and industries, this area has been less influenced by urbanization and modernization, allowing it to visually represent the authentic Northeast. More importantly, the village of Shifosi, with its long and rich history, is a multi-ethnic settlement filled with rich and valuable stories.

It’s worth mentioning that Professor Liu Lihong also explored the topic of land and people in the Northeast through his work *The Vanishing Land* (Liu, 2010) the Northeastern’s locality as it documents and reflects the profound socio-cultural

impacts during the urbanization challenges and transitions faced by Chinese villages. Although Professor Liu's work does not directly showcase the ethnic characteristics of the Northeast, he captures the process of Northeastern farmlands being engulfed by urbanization through his lens. His work attempts to discuss and present the fundamental significance of land to farmers' identities, lifestyles, and cultural heritage. Professor Liu's works were shot at the location where his studio now stands, which was a vast area of villages and farmlands more than a decade ago and is now a complex of modern buildings. *The Vanishing Land* is not only a record of the disappearing rural landscape but also a profound reflection on the loss of values, memory, and cultural identity in the process of modernization (Liu, 2017a), indirectly reflecting the erosion of modernity on traditional ethnicities, providing a valuable perspective and material for local research.

“Land is the essence of life’ the support for people’s emotions and spirits. No matter how time and space change, this support does not easily alter. The reason why the soul and spirit are eternal is precisely because of the artist’s profound expression of the essence of the soul. I cannot judge all of this, just as the beautiful scenes that often appear before my eyes in reality, some bring me joy, others bring me helplessness. Many things are beyond our control. Moreover, the connection between land and human emotion is inseparable. No matter your profession or background, there is a kind of connection to the land, which might be quite important in one’s life. Who can live without land?” (Liu Lihong, personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, November 2023)

Liu Lihong's reflection on the deep connection between land and human emotion underscores the irreplaceable role of land in shaping identity and cultural heritage. His work captures the loss experienced as urbanization encroaches upon traditional farmlands, highlighting the emotional and spiritual void left in its wake. This

perspective is crucial for understanding the broader implications of modernization on cultural identity and heritage, offering insights for local research and preservation efforts. Similarly, Christian (2017) explores the significance of land in her study of Indigenous research on land/place-based visual narratives and visual sovereignty. Her work underscores the deep connection Indigenous peoples have with the land, the evolution of their cultural survival strategies, and the importance of expressing this connection through visual narratives. Both Liu Lihong and Christian reveal the role of land in maintaining cultural identity and heritage, illustrating the importance of protecting and respecting the cultural significance of land in the context of modernization.

The focus on land in my research aligns with Christian's understanding of its significance, emphasising the need to preserve cultural identity amidst the pressures of modernization. My interest lies in the land of Northeast China and its role in sociocultural transformations, which resonates with the concepts of land significance proposed in Dorothy Christian's dissertation. We both recognize that land is not merely an economic resource but a cornerstone that sustains human emotions, culture, and spirituality.

To settlers, land often represents a commodity for ownership, economic profit, and leisure activities. Conversely, for Indigenous peoples, land encompasses a rich tapestry of meanings: it is their homeland, an archive of their origin stories, a repository for their ancestors' history, and a communal habitat for both wildlife and flora that provide sustenance and healing (Christian, 2017, p.87)

Land carries stories, history, and the interrelations of humans with nature. In my research, through Liu Lihong's work *Vanishing Land* (消失的土地), I've come to understand that land records people's lifestyles and cultural heritage, highlighting land's impact on identity and memory. These views coincide with those proposed in

Christian's dissertation, where land is seen as a foundation for education and knowledge transmission, as well as a site for cultural continuance, as we both see the central role of land in shaping and sustaining cultural identities.

In our dialogue with Jiao Wanju, a community member of Shifosi Village, I witnessed a profound cultural heritage and respect for tradition. Although he is Han Chinese, this nearly 70-year-old man has lived here since birth. The legends and living customs of Shifosi Village, including the origins of the Buddha statues, ancient wells, stories of the temples on the mountains, and the environmental destruction and subsequent natural disasters caused by urbanization, not only showcase the region's rich history and cultural traditions but also reveal the complex emotions of the local community when faced with modernization challenges. Particularly when villagers view natural disasters as punishment for the theft of Liao Ta (Tower from Liao Dynasty) antiques, such a notion might be considered superstitious in contemporary mainstream society, but for the residents of Shifosi it reflects their deep connection to the land and culture as well as their belief in protective deities. I consider listening to and narrating the knowledge of the community members as the foundation of the visual elements of my documentary:

“...30 years ago, Shenyang needed a large amount of building materials for construction, which is why they started to quarry stone, an activity that has been going on for over 20 years. At that time, there were not only government-operated quarries but also many teams that came here to mine stone. This mining activity almost halved the mountain, and even several of the watchtowers on the mountain tops were destroyed. Those watchtowers were built during the Kuomintang era for defence but were later abandoned. It is said that a person named Du Yuming (杜聿明) was responsible for building those watchtowers and left after completing the task. During the stone quarrying, some fortifications were

given special attention because they contained a large amount of steel reinforcement. Some of the steel bars weighed up to two tons, very valuable, so some people specifically used explosives to blow up these fortifications to recover the steel inside. Even the remnants of those watchtowers could find the wood of doors and mats from people's homes because many civilian timbers were requisitioned when the watchtowers were initially built." (Jiao Wanju, Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, November 2023)

"Now, there is a Shuangzhou City (双洲城) site in Shifosi Village, which was a settlement of Koreans hundreds of years ago. Here, the historical relics and culture of the Korean ethnicity are very rich, including some ancient tombs and remains of city walls. During the development process, many ancient Korean tombs were unearthed, finding urns and ancient coins with Korean inscriptions. Xue Li (薛礼) trained soldiers here and was respected for refusing orders to kill Koreans. Xue Li gave the Korean people three years to move out, due to communication errors between Han Chinese and Koreans, the Korean people thought they had only three days to leave. It is said that every year during festivals, Koreans would worship Xue Li to express their gratitude." (Jiao Wanju, Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, November 2023)

"...This story is what I heard from the elders in the village, about a magical well and a monk. A long time ago, a family in the village was distressed because the better wine they brewed couldn't be sold. One day, a monk passed by their home asking for some water to drink. Although not wealthy, the family was very kind and offered the monk wine instead of water. The monk touched by the family's kindness, decided to help them. He told the family he would dig a magical well that could turn water into delicious wine. Initially, the family did not

believe in this myth, but when the monk indeed dug the well and the water scooped out turned into wine, they were astonished. The well solved their poverty, and the wine they brewed became very popular.” (Jiao Wanju, Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, December 2023)

“...One of the nine Buddha statues, because it did not succeed in its cultivation and broke the precepts, could not leave like the other statues and remained in this world. One day, a girl surnamed Li, and a few other girls went up the mountain to dig wild vegetables. They accidentally threw the vegetables they dug into a round frame made of pig kidneys onto this Buddha statue, and from then on, the statue recognized the girl surnamed Li as its wife. As time went by, the girl grew up, and the Buddha statue came to find her, and they eventually had offspring, a boy named Li Fukuan (李富宽). But this Buddha statue would leave its pedestal at night to damage people’s fields, and the villagers could not cure him no matter what they tried. Later, they brought stonemasons to wrap the statue with a belt and headband, trying to stop his misdeeds. In the end, they placed the statue in the Guan Gong Temple, hoping to calm everything down.” (Jiao Wanju, Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, November 2023)

In my ethnographic documentary, I have made Jiao Wanju’s oral history a central focus, delving into the profound connection between the land and its stories. I visited the locations Jiao mentioned, including Qi Xing Shan, the village Buddha statues, and the Shuang Zhou Cheng ruins, capturing their current state. By integrating these visuals with oral histories, I create a bridge between the ancient and the modern. Jiao’s accounts reveal Shifoshi Villages’ rich cultural heritage and traditions, and the community’s complex emotions in the face of modernization. These narratives are crucial for both doctoral research and the depth and cultural value of my documentary.

These stories, heard from the community members, serve as a bridge connecting the audience with the Shifosi community. They not only provide rich visual material for the documentary but more importantly, through these stories, the audience can gain a deep understanding of the community's cultural background, values, and the complex emotions faced when dealing with modernization challenges. Therefore, these dialogues and stories become the core of my documentary creation, guiding the direction of the visual narrative, making my work not just a simple documentary but a profound exploration and exchange of culture.

Industrial Symbols and Cultural Heritage: Constructing the Identity of Northeast China

As I endeavoured to connect the modernity and Indigeneity of the Northeast China using Indigenous methodologies, I was initially uncertain where this approach would lead me. However, I was confident that through in-depth conversations with Northeasterners, I would not only gain a deeper understanding of my own culture but also find answers to two initial questions. These conversations, stories, and experiences helped me construct an understanding of Northeastern identity. Moreover, by drawing upon Archibald's "Storywork" principles to guide my conversational practice and content analysis, what distinguished my research was its adherence to the principles of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. Through this, my practice aimed not only at personal growth but also at contributing to the well-being and development of the community.

To delve deeper into this exploration, at the beginning of the research project, I asked myself: What visual elements can truly reflect the Indigenous culture of the Northeast? Are they the modern industrial elements, or symbols deeply rooted in Indigenous culture? In conversations with Dai Wenqiang and Ren Yi, I gained different perspectives. Ren Yi pointed out:

“Industrial elements are one of the most significant symbols of the Northeast for me. In my childhood memories, red brick walls, towering chimneys, and intricate pipelines not only form the physical appearance of Northeastern cities but are also deeply engraved in the memory of Northeastern culture. These elements are directly related to the Northeast’s long industrial history and culture, reflecting the region’s important role and contribution to China’s modernization process. When I see these industrial landscapes, I not only feel the industrial strength of the Northeast but also sense the living conditions and spirit of the people from that era.” (Ren Yi, Personal Communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, September 2023)

Ren Yi’s reflection highlights the profound role of industrial symbols in shaping the cultural memory and regional identity of Northeast China. His emphasis on red brick walls, towering chimneys, and intricate pipelines underscores how these elements are not merely physical structures but emotional and historical markers that define the urban landscape and collective consciousness of Northeasterners. His perspective reinforces the dominant visual discourse of the Northeast as an industrial powerhouse, yet it also raises questions about whether this industrial-centric representation fully encapsulates the region’s cultural diversity.

In chapter five, I explored the issue of how the industrial symbols and cultural heritage of the Northeast interact with modernity and Indigeneity. Through conversations with visual storytellers, filmmakers, and Indigenous people from the Northeast, it became evident that although it seems one aspect is engulfing the other, the inherent local genes of the Northeast determine the contemporary face of the region. Dai Wenqiang interpreted this issue from his perspective, stating:

“People from the Northeast like to wear valuable items (such as gold

chains) on their bodies, a practice similar to the traditions of nomadic peoples. Nomads, during their migrations, often wore their wealth in the form of ornaments for ease of transport and as a means of currency exchange. This habit of displaying wealth has been reflected in the contemporary dressing style of people from the Northeast, especially influenced by the traditions of the steppe peoples (such as the Mongols) and fishing and hunting peoples (such as the Manchus). The traditional attire of these ethnic groups is often exaggerated and brightly coloured, favouring the use of numerous decorative items to display personal identity and social status.” (Dai Wenqiang, Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, October 2023)

Dai Wenqiang’s perspective reveals the tradition of Northeastern people wearing valuable items, reflecting the influence of nomadic culture. This habit not only showcases personal identity and social status but also highlights the deep connection between Northeastern culture and its history. In my research, this cultural feature helps me better understand the reshaping of identity in the interaction between modernity and Indigeneity in the Northeast. Through these diverse perspectives, it became evident that Northeast China’s cultural identity is shaped by both Indigenous traditions and modern influences. Dai Wenqiang’s observations about clothing practices, for instance, reveal how nomadic cultural elements persist and evolve in contemporary contexts. These cultural practices demonstrate the ongoing negotiation between tradition and modernity in Northeast China, where Indigenous cultural elements continue to influence modern expressions of identity.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provide a detailed textual explanation for my documentary, capturing the essence of my dialogues with Northeastern visual storytellers. By engaging with

these storytellers, I gleaned their insights and understandings of the visual elements that define the Northeast. These conversations were instrumental in shaping a localized method of visual storytelling, which I then intertwined with the narratives and deep-rooted connections of the Shifosi Villagers to their land and its stories. This foundational framework forms the basis of my documentary.

Implementing Indigenous research methodologies in China posed a significant challenge, given the scepticism towards their Western origins. However, I found that the core purpose of these methodologies—decolonization and the reclamation of Indigenous knowledge—resonated deeply with my work. By treating the shared cultural information and stories as ‘shared knowledge’ I was able to respect and honour the narratives provided by the local visual storytellers, ensuring that their cultural expressions were preserved in a meaningful and culturally appropriate manner.

In this discussion, I have drawn out the concept of “shared knowledge” introduced by social psychologists Herbert H. Clark and Deanna Wilkes-Gibbs (1986), which emphasises collaboration through common understanding. This approach, further refined by Dorothy Christian (2017), treats shared cultural information and stories not merely as data but as collaborative narratives that enrich the understanding of Indigenous cultures. This perspective allowed me to appreciate the complexity and multidimensionality of Indigenous lives, arts, and cultures in Northeast China.

Throughout this chapter, I emphasised the importance of land in shaping cultural narratives. By documenting and reflecting on the socio-cultural impacts of urbanization on traditional farmlands, I highlighted how land serves as a vital element in maintaining cultural heritage and identity. The interviews with visual narrators and filmmakers provided profound insights into the contradictory connections between modernity and Northeastern ethnicity, illustrating the challenges and opportunities presented by new technologies in preserving and disseminating Northeastern culture

and knowledge.

Chapter 7

Visual Sovereignty and Cultural Continuity: The Indigenous Narrative of Northeast Chinese Ethnographic Documentaries in a Modern Context

Chapter Overview

After examining how visual storytellers and filmmakers in the previous chapter contribute to preserving the cultural identity of Northeast China's ethnic minorities, this chapter turns its attention to documentaries. These films offer a deeper exploration of how indigenous narratives, cultural continuity, and visual sovereignty are expressed and challenged in the face of social transformation. I explore the region's long-standing visual imagery tradition, along with the impacts and transformations brought about by contemporary social changes (He, 2018, Fan, 2018, Wang, 2021, pp. 42-44). Following that, I note that the contemporary major inhabitants of the Northeast are Han Chinese, whose culture, history, and identity backgrounds significantly differ from those of the ethnic minorities.

Within this context, this chapter analyses documentaries focusing on the Indigenous ethnicities of the Northeast China, *Aoluguya* series by Gu Tao, and *Pale View of Hills* (远山淡景, 2018) by Liu Yujia. These documentaries do more than just portray the genuine lives of ethnic minorities; they interrogate the challenges and shifts these cultures encounter amidst the forces of modernization and industrialization. This leads me to pose two pressing questions: Does the contemporary depiction of Northeastern ethnic minorities' lives adequately embody the essence of their traditional culture? Furthermore, in what ways might the authenticity of Northeastern ethnic minority cultures be redefined.

To tackle these inquiries, this chapter employs Indigenous film theory, which well-established in contexts such as North America, Australia, and New Zealand, remains underexplored in the study of documentaries featuring Northeast China's ethnic minorities. Christian's (2017) conceptualization of Indigenous film aesthetics serves as a framework for analysing how these communities are represented on screen. Integrating insights from regional visual artists further broadens the scope of this study, applying Indigenous film theory to new cultural and geographical contexts.

Indigeneity, Minority Representation, and Cultural Identity in Northeastern Chinese Ethnic Documentaries

In this section, I first clarify the distinctions between indigenous and ethnic minorities in the context of Northeast China and explore how documentaries capture their cultural identities. This distinction is crucial in the context of Northeast China, where certain ethnic groups, such as the Oroqen and Evenki, are viewed as Indigenous due to their long-standing connection to the land and traditional practices. In contrast, other ethnic minorities, such as the Korean ethnic groups, while culturally unique and recognized as minorities within China, may not share the same historical link to the land.

For the purposes of this chapter, I define Indigenous documentaries as cinematic works that focus on ethnic groups in Northeast China with a long-standing historical connection to the land, such as the Oroqen and Evenki. Ronald Niezen highlights that the deep connection between Indigenous peoples and their traditional lands is a fundamental element of their identity (Niezen, 2003). This notion is central to understanding how these documentaries, often created by filmmakers within these communities, reflect their struggles and resilience in maintaining cultural identity in the context of modernity. These films visually portray the importance of land in

preserving cultural survival, which aligns with Niezen's argument about the critical role of land in Indigenous identity. While the term ethnic minorities will be used to refer to the broader set of recognized groups in the region, including both those with Indigenous status and those without, the focus here is on how these groups' visual representation in documentaries helps us understand their cultural transformations and survival within the framework of modernity.

Modernity generally refers to the significant social, cultural, and technological changes experienced by human society since the late 18th century (Berman, 1983). Its main characteristics include industrialization, urbanization, rationalism, individualism, and secularization (Giddens, 1991). These traits signify a major shift away from traditional ideologies and ways of life toward modernity. Appadurai emphasised that modernity represents an era of cultural collisions, amalgamations, and flows, breaking traditional boundaries, deconstructing past identities, and constructing new spatial and temporal dimensions (Appadurai, 1996).

As one of the earliest regions in China to industrialize, the cultural trajectory of the Northeast has always been deeply intertwined with its evolving sense of modernity. From this perspective, it is particularly important to delve into the Northeast's cultural distinctiveness and transformations surrounded by industrialization, urbanization. For instance, with the change in economic structure, the Northeast has experienced significant population migrations; at the same time, modern media has introduced external cultural symbols into the Northeast, initiating complex interactions with local culture. The rise of prosperous urban centre in the Northeast has also given rise to new forms of cultural expression. These transformations call for a modernity-based perspective to examine how culture in the Northeast has evolved.

In the conversation with Song Xingyuan, he mentioned the unique geopolitical characteristics and colonial historical legacy of the Northeast region, which provide a unique soil for the development of modernity in the Northeast. He pointed out:

“The Northeast has a rather special feature, which is its numerous borders, adjoining Russia, North Korea, and Japan, and these border areas all exhibit phenomena of ethnic crossover. But honestly, I only have a superficial understanding of this issue and cannot fully clarify the nuances. I wish to approach from a historical dimension, especially the examples you just mentioned, to explore issues of modernity and ethnicity. You previously mentioned to me that the foundation of modernization in the Northeast was the industrial legacy left from the colonial period, which was later inherited and developed by the new Chinese government, making the Northeast one of China’s largest industrialized regions.” (Personal communication, translated by Zhang Hengtai, October 2023)

While Song Xingyuan’s perspective highlights the historical factors that shaped the modern development of the region, Dai Wenqiang provides a present-day view on how these legacies continue to influence ethnic cultural dynamics in the Northeast, Dai has been actively involved in cultural event among Manchu and Sibe ethnic group in Shenyang, he notes:

The Manchu ethnic group has essentially lost many of its distinct cultural features, except for some aspects of clothing, archery methods, and some past rituals. Manchu language, in the Northeast, is only used as a mother tongue in a small part of Heilongjiang, and in other places, it has already been lost." (Personal communication, translated by Zhang Hengtai, November 2023)

Dai’s account of the cultural changes within the Manchu community, such as the loss of language and traditions, offers a concrete example of the broader cultural assimilation pressures that Manchu face in the Northeast, illustrating the dynamic

relationship between modernity and cultural survival.

Mainstream discourse during China's post-revolutionary period frequently associates modernity with the Han ethnic group, portraying them as the embodiment of civilization and progress. In contrast, ethnic minorities are often depicted as primitive, backward, and in need of the development associated with modernity. This binary opposition, driven by the state's ideological agenda, reinforces the Han's superiority as the dominant group, while ignoring the agency and cultural dynamism of ethnic minorities (Dirlik, 2002, pp.100-101).

Northeastern ethnic minority documentaries, by focusing on the daily lives and inner worlds of ethnic minorities, question and challenge mainstream representations (Wang, 2021, pp. 42-44, He, 2018, pp.235-236). These documentaries, with their distinctive features in terms of subject matter selection, creative attitude, methods, narrative style, and visual aesthetics, are deeply rooted in the land and cultures of the Northeast. They refuse to simplistically label ethnic minorities as "primitive" or "exotic," instead focusing on the complex situations and unique cultural identities of these minorities in the context of modern transformation (Yuan, 2020, pp. 132-137). By depicting the continuation and variation of ethnic minority cultural traditions in contemporary contexts, these documentaries reveal an alternative path of modernity, one where tradition and the modern, ethnicity, and universality intertwine and coexist. This aligns with Dirlik's emphasis on the plural forms and paths of modernity. He highlighted that different groups and regions demonstrate unique cultural creativity in the process of modern transformation, resulting in distinctive "hybrid" forms (Dirlik, 2002, pp.28-29). The efforts of Northeastern ethnic minorities to preserve and innovate traditional culture in the process of modernization challenge the monolithic imagination of modernity.

Furthermore, Dorothy Christian's perspective on Indigenous visuality provides a valuable lens for understanding documentaries about the ethnic minorities of the

Northeast. It is important to clarify that, for settlers, land is often viewed in terms of ownership, control, and resource use for economic and recreational purposes (Christian,2017). This differs from the Indigenous viewpoint, where the land is regarded as a homeland, deeply intertwined with cultural, spiritual, and ancestral meanings. Indigenous peoples' relationship with the land is deeply rooted in their culture, traditions, spiritual beliefs, and historical identity. Therefore, when discussing the relationship between people and in Northeastern ethnic minority documentaries, it is crucial to emphasise this distinction. These documentaries are rooted in their own ethnic cultural contexts, reflecting regional and ethnic characteristics, all based on a profound understanding of the land and the stories of their community.

The documentary work of Gu Tao provides valuable theoretical and practical references for my creative practice. I approach the lives of various ethnic groups in the Northeast with an open and inclusive mindset, showcasing the continuation of tradition as well as new cultural formations, with a focus on visual elements that reflect the regional characteristics of the Northeast. As Christian pointed out, our relationship with our culture and our responsibilities to the land, family/clan, community, and tribe/nation are partially enacted and embodied through the cyclical ceremonies we hold each year, to continue all life on the land (Christian, 2017, p123). Indigenous aesthetics are embedded in the complexity of all these interconnected things, I aim to capture their texture and implications, expressing a deep cultural affection for this land. Ethnographic documentaries from the Northeast China should be rooted in the local context, delve into the spiritual connection between ethnic groups and the land, and narrate stories belonging to this land with visual language, showing the identity anxieties and cultural predicaments of ethnic minorities in the process of modernization. Despite a weakening of identity with regional and ethnic culture during modern societal development, the Northeast still maintains a profound connection with its historical and cultural heritage. These connections provide us with a unique research perspective to understand the roots of Northeastern culture (Ma, 2006, pp.90-94).

The Visual Narratives of Northeast Ethnic Documentaries:

Reconstructing Ethnicity in the Context of Modernization

During the production of the documentary *Twilight Over the Silent Hill*, I conducted an in-depth exploration of Shifosi Village, a place brimming with millennia of history and a rich cultural heritage. The film aims to unveil the profound emotional bond between the villagers and the land while examining how the tides of modernization have reshaped these connections. Through observation of the daily life in Shifosi Village and listening to the narratives of its inhabitants, we have documented not only the continuity of cultural heritage but also the dialogue between individual and collective memories, and between traditional and contemporary practices. This documentary is dedicated to depicting how Shifosi Village, as a vibrant cultural entity, sustains its identity and continuity within the flux of time, offering us a unique perspective to comprehend the intricate interplay between culture, time, space, and social changes.

I had the privilege of engaging in deep conversations with two village elders. Elder Jiao Wanjue reflected on the past, recounting the profound emotional ties between the villagers and the land. Despite the village undergoing the baptism of modernization, the connection between the local community and the land has never severed, reflecting their enduring legacy and sense of identity. Elder Jiao fondly recalled the past, narrating the villagers' deep-rooted bond with their land.

Growing up in Northeast China, most of the kids wore those split-bottom pants, and every family made clothes for their little ones. Back then, we couldn't afford to throw away socks or trousers just because they had a small hole. We'd patch them up again and again, making a single pair last for years.

In the village, each household raised sheep. Lamb offal and pig heads were delicacies reserved for festivals and special occasions. And that object known as “gala ha” (嘎拉哈), which is a pig’s bone used as a toy for entertainment. It was a common sight, with every family hanging one, holding to the belief that it could fend off evil spirits.

When I was a child, we didn’t have any fancy toys. We had to get creative and make our own fun, like sewing little pouches or crafting shuttlecocks. To be honest, even though we were a bit poor back then, life was fulfilling. We were closely connected to this land, and our feelings for it ran deep. (Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, November 2023)

His words are plain yet sincere, clearly revealing his deep attachment to his homeland. Another community member, Zhang Suyun, said:

Let me tell you about this thing. Our former party secretary, he just didn’t get it. He wanted to tear down the ancient well in our village. I was so angry! That well is our village’s treasure, who would be willing to let him destroy it?

I remember that day, I wasn’t at home. The folks told me that when they were tearing down the well, they even held a ceremony. Ah, yes, I heard that when the well was built, they also had some sort of ritual. It’s said to have some special meaning. Anyway, that’s just the custom in our village.

The ancient well, it’s got to be sixty or seventy years old. These past few years, we’ve been wanting to renovate it, to protect it properly. Who knew that this term’s leadership wouldn’t allow the repairs and insisted

on tearing it down? I told them, this well can't be touched, the folks won't agree to it!

This well has witnessed how many years of our village's ups and downs, our feelings have long been tied together with it. If it's gone, can Stone Buddha Temple still be called Stone Buddha Temple? This matter, us villagers can't easily agree to it. (Personal communication, Translated by Zhang Hengtai, December 2023)

Under the pressures of modernization, the ancient well—an emblem of rural memory—now faces the threat of demolition, symbolizing the process of Deterritorialization. As Appadurai states, Identities that were once fixed in the geography of places have become unstable and blurred, resulting in a state of Deterritorialization (Appadurai, 1996, p. 37). Yet the villagers' attachment to the ancient well, and Zhang Suyun's intense sentiment of reluctance, exemplify how ethnicity, a sense of place, and collective memory can be reactivated in a modern context. Appadurai also emphasises that "Indigeneity and ethnicity have not vanished but are re-articulated and reinforced through symbols and emblems over a larger scope, in the process of Reterritorialization" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 48). As Christian remarks, the environmental ethics of the Syilx, built upon the responsibilities between humans and the land, creatures, rather than a simple binary opposition.

"Syilx environmental ethics model constitutes a set of relational laws that is based on the responsibilities of humans as only one of the life forms who are part of the Circle of Life, not above, or greater than the lands, waters, animals, winged ones, trees, plants, and other seen and unseen beings." (Christian, 2017, p. 112)

Indigeneity, therefore, is not an unchanging essential attribute but a vibrant network of relationships, dynamically reinterpreted, expressed, and strengthened through

continuous cultural practice in the modern context. The attachment and expression of Northeast Indigenous documentary filmmakers towards the land stem from this profound sense of responsibility, a continuation of Indigenous ethics in contemporary times.

Yet, over time, rural homelands have experienced the subtle but profound impacts of “Deterritorialization.” As we turn our cameras towards the city, we unexpectedly discover that elderly people who have relocated to urban areas still preserve their connection to the land in various ways. Director Zhuo Kailuo recounted his observations of the elderly in urban communities who persist in planting vegetables in limited spaces such as rooftops and balconies. Even under constrained conditions, they maintain their bond with the land in various forms. The common people are obsessed with the land. This obsession is not just about growing vegetables; it’s more about a spiritual sustenance. The urban elders’ commitment to their “Sky Gardens” is a continuation of their rural identity.

“I have seen elderly people in various communities growing vegetables and flowers in different ways. My parents are in a similar situation. After they retired, they left Panjin for Chifeng and leased a piece of land specifically to grow vegetables and fruits. Often, they can’t finish all the produce, which is left on the plants until it falls to the ground and rots. Once, at a friend’s community, I saw someone using foam boxes to grow vegetables on the roof of the parking lot entrance. That rooftop is very small, only enough to place four or five foam boxes. It is very dangerous for the elderly to water and fertilize the vegetables each time because the space is so small and there are no protective railings around.” (Personal communication, translated by Zhang Hengtai, November 2023)

This deep-rooted connection to the land is not only preserved in daily practices but is also a recurring theme in contemporary Indigenous visual storytelling. Documentary

filmmakers have long sought to capture the evolving relationship between people and their land, especially amid the processes of Deterritorialization and modernization. Gu Tao stands out for his long-term commitment to documenting the lives of Northern ethnic minorities, offering an intimate portrayal of their struggles and resilience. His documentary *The Last Moose of Aoluguya*, portrays the challenges faced by the Oroqen people as they navigate the loss of their traditional hunting lifestyle. Through poetic visual storytelling, his work reflects the anxieties surrounding modernity's impact on Indigenous identity, while also celebrating the endurance of cultural memory amid the transformation (Sun, 2016, pp.122-142) . Confronted with ecological changes and the disappearance of hunting culture, in the context of the contradictions between the modern and the traditional, he ultimately chooses compromise. Gu Tao's work reflects the intricate relationship between humans and nature while exploring the anxieties surrounding modernity's impact on traditional culture. His documentaries seek to rekindle appreciation for disappearing Indigenous traditions by portraying the daily lives and cultural expressions of ethnic minorities.

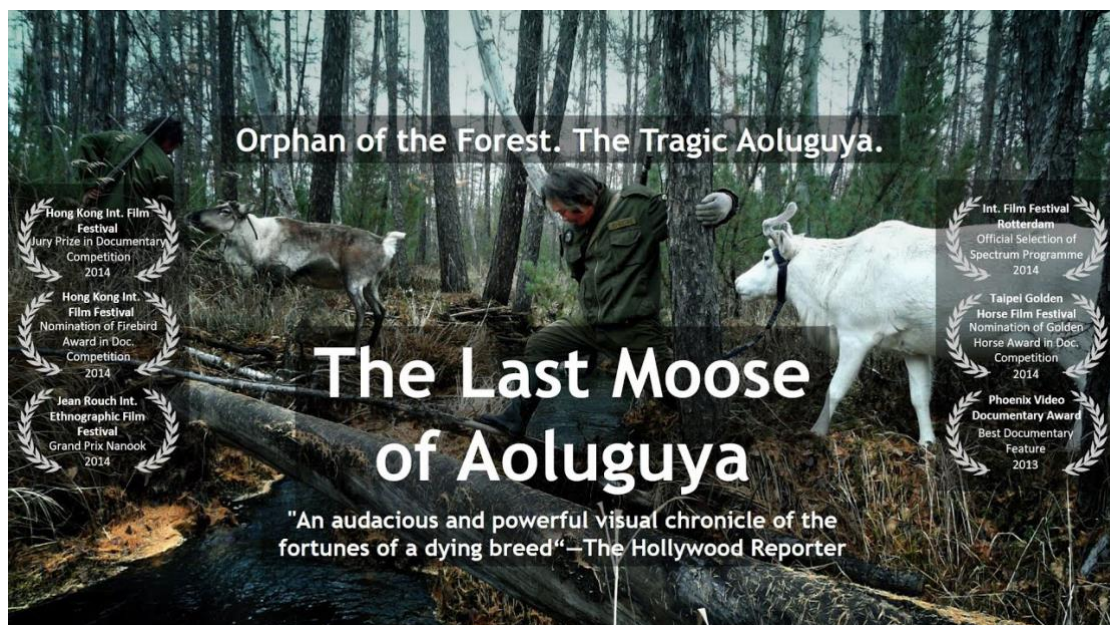


Figure 7 The Last Moose of Aoluguya, Documentary, Gu Tao, 2013

It is an undeniable that, with the tide of modernization, Indigeneity is experiencing a

decline. Director Li Tie, with his keen observations, points out, "There are not many ethnic groups that still preserve their original living habits. What I see as so-called primitive ethnicities are all aimed at “tourism”. (Li Tie, Personal communication, translated by Zhang Hengtai, September 2023) Industrialization and urbanization are distancing people increasingly. The weakening of ethnic identity awareness among Northeast minorities is a manifestation of this change within the Chinese context.

However, Morgan Ndlovu critiques this ‘Touristification’ of Indigeneity, arguing that the representation of Indigenous identity in modern society is not simply a matter of decline or commodification (Ndlovu, 2019). He analyses two examples from South Africa, a ‘Zulu cultural village’ in Pietermaritzburg and ‘witchcraft’ in an urban area. Although these cultural performances seem aimed at tourism or commercial purposes, they reflect the ways in which Indigenous culture is being reconfigured and negotiated within modern contexts.

It would be too simplistic to attribute the weakening of ethnic identity solely to tourism or modernization. Instead, the cultural adaptation processes that these groups undergo in new environments should be recognized. The way Northeast minorities present their cultural identities within the tourism industry may represent not just superficial commodification, but a complex process of negotiation, adaptation, and self-redefinition.

Visual Narratives: Exploring Cultural Identity in *Twilight Over the Silent Hill*

Shifosi Village, with a history of over 1000 years, is located in the northwest of Shenbei New District (沈北新区), Shenyang, Liaoning Province. The village is named after a Liao Dynasty temple on the Seven-Star Mountain to the north, which houses ten Buddha statues. Centred around the Qi Xing Shan and surrounded by the Liao River, the village boasts a well-preserved natural environment. During the Liao

Dynasty (辽代), Shuangcheng County Yamen was established within what is now the bounds of Shifosi Village. In the Ming Dynasty, Shifangsi Fort (石方寺) was constructed here, becoming an important military stronghold to the north of Shenyang. Due to its proximity to military defence areas, the village saw a significant decrease in population and subsequently declined. After the establishment of the Qing Dynasty, to protect the birthplace of the Qing, a portion of the Sibe people were relocated to Shengjing (盛京) in 1699, making Shifosi Village one of the main residences of the Sibe people in Shengjing, and the village gradually regained its vitality (Liu and Hao, 2021, pp.129-134). Towards the end of the Liberation War, Shifosi Village, as a strategic buffer in the Liaoshen Campaign (辽沈战役), saw the construction of 72 bunkers by the Nationalist Party, remnants of which remain to this day (Wang et al., 2022, pp.115-117).

Studying such a historically and culturally rich village allows us to delve into the historical context and cultural transformation of Chinese rural society, as it remains distant from cities and the influences of modernity. In this context, the village becomes a vivid scene where tradition and modernity are interwoven, in which traditional visual symbols and ways of life are not only preserved but also display new vitality and meaning in dialogue with modern culture. Focusing on the natural environment and cultural sites of Shifosi Village can enhance our understanding of the traditional relationship between people and land and inform our approach to cultural heritage protection strategies. Archibald highlights the significance of understanding Indigenous storytelling principles and ethics for the continuation and innovation of traditional cultures (Archibald, 2008), offering us perspectives on how to comprehend and preserve these traditions against a modern backdrop.

During the production of *Twilight Over the Silent Hill*, I drew inspiration from the creative philosophies and aesthetic approaches of Gu Tao and Liu Yujia. This approach to documentary filmmaking particularly resonated with me., as Gu Tao articulated: “I make documentaries by following my emotions rather than by demand,

and I cannot be certain what the world needs.” (Gu, 2021). I endeavour to capture the cultural nuances of the Shifosi region through an open narrative structure and a poetic visual language, offering a multifaceted portrayal of its profound cultural essence.

In *The Pale View of Hills* (远山淡景, 2018), director Liu Yujia offers a deeply perceptive exploration of the complex interplay between tradition and modernity through the figure of the Kucha princess. The film does not simply position the princess as an embodiment of traditional identity or a participant in modern urban life but keenly captures her negotiation and vacillation between these two identities. As the “Last Princess,” the Kucha princess seems to symbolize the end of a local tradition. Her lifestyle and daily practices, such as receiving tourists in traditional attire within the palace, allude to a bygone Indigenous culture. In this sense, she is the last guardian of a fragile “locality.” However, the film does not stop there but goes deeper into her everyday life to uncover a more complex reality.



Figure 8 The Pale View of Hill, Documentary, Liu Yujia, 2018

Inspired by Liu Yujia’s profound insights and aesthetic principles, my film seeks to capture the rich cultural heritage of the Shifosi region. Using a flexible narrative

structure, vivid imagery, and attention to cultural detail, the film aims to reflect the depth and complexity of the region's traditions. As Liu Yujia articulates:

“When I employ extended shots, it is not the plot or characters that I wish to convey, but rather the essence of the object and its setting. My aim is to allow time to unfold, to blend characters, objects, and settings into an unbroken expanse, preserving the surroundings and sentiment of the scene, thus offering a tableau for contemplation. It invites the viewer to be present within the image's temporal and spatial realm, to engage in reflection and imagination, instead of anticipating directive storytelling.”
(Liu, 2017b)

In a parallel approach, I leverage these protracted takes and an open-ended narrative style to envelop the audience in the lived experience of the Shifosi region, to feel the pulse of its distinct cultural resonance.

Meanwhile, Liu Yujia proposes that “the landscape requires the dimension of ‘people’ within it, meaning that it’s the ‘second nature’ formed by human productive and practical activities that can possibly become a landscape.” (Liu, 2017b) This is precisely what my film strives to showcase. Whether it’s the autumn harvest that reflects the connection between people and land, the ethnic clothing elements in archery competitions, or close-up shots of dialect usage and idol guarding actions, my documentary is committed to showing how the local people’s ways of life and cultural traditions have jointly shaped the unique landscape of this land.

I aim to share a concept with the audience through imagery: against the backdrop of globalization, tradition and modernity are not dichotomous opposites but can interpenetrate and together weave a moving cultural narrative on the lands of Northeast China. Archibald’s insights provide a theoretical foundation for my concept, stating, “For many Indigenous writers, stories are a way to connect the past with the

future, one generation with another, the land with its people, and the people with their stories.” (Archibald, 2008, p.145) This resonates with Gu Tao’s insights on cultural continuity, as Gu Tao articulates, “Lifestyles and modes of production shape national traits, and these traits are changing. My role might just be that of a recorder.” (Gu, 2021) His works showcase how the Evenki people hold on to cultural traditions amidst drastic changes, and through their dances when drunk and their daily toils, we see their efforts to find a balance in renegotiating cultural identity.

My work is also shaped by Gu Tao’s profound focus on individuals, as he states, “I focus on the state of people, always emphasising the sense of breathing.” (Gu, 2021) This guidance directs me to focus on moments that reveal the essence of humanity, the joy of farmers in the harvest season, the reverence of forest rangers guarding Buddha statues, and the depth of elders telling stories. These recorded moments thread together the cultural fabric of the Shifosi area, enabling the audience to experience the enduring presence of cultural traditions within the lives of individuals.

Gu Tao’s exploration of aesthetic opens new perspectives for me, “I believe everything is an expression of emotion not just the so-called ‘sentiment’. Sentiment might be an external expectation, but emotion is more personal and real, nowadays, many people talk about sentiment, but I think we should view the world in our own way, experiencing life in different places” (Gu, 2021). Following his creative footsteps, I also dedicate myself to narrating the cultural stories of the Shifosi area through the art form of documentaries, exploring the subtle relationship between tradition and modernity. Within these images, not only is the resilience of cultural traditions in the evolution of time revealed, but also the wisdom and dignity of individuals and communities in identity negotiations are displayed. It is this emotional bond that inspires me to seek deeper meanings behind the stories in my documentaries, looking for those cultural elements that continue to be passed down through the ages. Thus, in the creative process, I also realize the flexibility and adaptability of stories, as Archibald suggests, “Many Indigenous storytellers will

adapt and tailor stories according to the occasion and purpose” (Archibald, 2008, p.32) . This adaptability and flexibility are particularly important in documentary creation, allowing me to tell traditional cultural stories in new artistic forms, thus generating unique aesthetic effects and profound real-world significance, exploring the subtle relationship between tradition and modernity.

In the production of *Twilight Over the Silent Hill*, my aim was not merely to document the natural landscapes and daily activities of the Shifosi area but to use these visual narratives to showcase the core and soul of the culture in the Northeast region. In doing so, I applied documentary creation standards and aesthetic choices to narrate key activities and elements like autumn harvest, fishing, archery competitions, funerals, and Buddha statues.

Both the operations of modern agricultural machinery and the adherence to traditional harvesting methods were captured. This coexistence highlights a community that, amidst modernization, still clings to tradition, embodying the fusion of technology and tradition as a microcosm of the region’s cultural evolution. In the film, I incorporated the Jurchen tradition of “Shooting the Willow”, an ancient archery contest with deep cultural significance. This story, passed down for generations, tells of Wanyan Aguda, who challenged warriors to shoot through a marked willow twig while riding on horseback, a feat that required exceptional skill and precision. Over time, this tradition became an essential part of community ceremonies, reinforcing the values of courage, unity, and respect for ancestral practices.

Today, the archery competition in Shifosi Village continues this legacy. At this gathering, traditional culture enthusiasts don traditional clothing and use handcrafted bows to participate in the contests, visually embodying the persistence of Indigenous cultural practices. This scene in my documentary serves as a testament to the ongoing relationship between history and contemporary identity, exemplifying Wilson’s concept of relationality. “For Indigenous people, ‘land’ is not just an island. It’s an

entity within the modern nation-state” (Wilson, 2008, p.80). Land, ancestors, and descendants are intimately connected, forming the basis of Indigenous identity.

By conversing with those drilling through ice for fishing, I learned they see ice fishing as a way to connect with the land and ancestors. These scenes show how they adapt to and utilize the extreme natural environment to survive, passing down ancient fishing skills. As Raheja states, documentary creation itself is a form of exercising visual sovereignty and defending cultural expression (Raheja, 2010, p.194). Through deep interaction and narrating their stories in Indigenous languages, I, as a documentary creator, respect and highlight Indigenous agency.

The archery competition illustrates the continuation of tradition through cultural changes. I documented how this sport, imbued with Manchu culture, is preserved and celebrated in contemporary society. As Christian suggests, excellent Indigenous films should incorporate elements like attire to showcase unique rhythms and meanings (Christian, 2017, pp.140-142). Through close-up shots of attire and its interaction with the environment and activity, my film visually preserves Sibe and Manchu cultural symbols. It highlights the significance of archery in contemporary national heritage while immersing the audience in the historical memory and national spirit embedded in traditional sports. A legend about the hero Wanyan Aguda further explores the historical and cultural connotations of this custom. In this scene, participants wear distinctive Sibe and Manchu attire. Ethnic costumes are physical representations of a group’s historical traditions and aesthetic tastes. Through close-up shots capturing the details of the attire and its reflection with the environment and activities, the film visually reproduces Sibe and Manchu cultural symbols, highlighting the significant position of archery in contemporary national cultural heritage, immersing the audience in the historical memory and national spirit contained in traditional sports.

The funeral segment reflects my personal narrative perspective. With respect and

empathy, I captured this solemn moment, striving to understand the cultural significance and community emotions of this ceremony from within. The appropriate camera distance respects the sanctity of the ritual while capturing subtle expressions and movements, reflecting my cultural stance and values.

Regarding the Buddha statues, I explored cultural clues through a legend told to me by Jiao Wanju about a god and a village maiden conceiving offspring together. This statue, closely intertwined with the environment and the villagers' lives, embodies local belief systems and everyday practices. One particularly moving scene in the film shows forest rangers quietly guarding these abandoned statues. Their actions, marked by care, reverence, and persistence, symbolise more than just the protection of stone figures; they reflect a deep-rooted sense of cultural responsibility and spiritual continuity.

As Wilson (Wilson, 2008, p.97) argues, Indigenous research must consider the web of relationships among people, land, and concepts. In this context, the rangers, statues, and religious practices form a living nexus within the cultural landscape of Northeast China. The close-up shots of their movements emphasize how tradition is kept alive not through grand ceremonies, but through quiet acts of devotion. Guarding the statues becomes a gesture of safeguarding memory, belief and identity, enacting cultural stewardship through everyday practice.

Throughout the documentary, I chose an open, fragmented narrative style, weaving stories through collage and recollection, which mirrors the way memory operates—nonlinear and often disjointed. This structure invites viewers to reflect on not only cultural identity and the logic of time but also the intricate workings of memory itself. By employing metaphors and evocative imagery, I subtly express the spiritual connotations of cultural customs and the inner emotions of the characters, as these often come to us through fragmented memories. This poetic imagery not only emphasises my emotional connection with the subjects but also mirrors how cultural

memories are recalled and reinterpreted over time, reflecting a deeper understanding of both individual and collective memory.

Conclusion

This chapter, through an in-depth analysis of documentaries about minority ethnic groups in Northeast China, reveals the complex interactions involved in the reconstruction of Indigenous cultural identities amidst modernization. I have synthesized the theories of scholars such as Appadurai, Archibald, Wilson, and Christian to deepen our understanding of how the cultures of minority ethnic groups in the Northeast strive to maintain their continuity and uniqueness while addressing the challenges of modernity.

The case studies of Gu Tao's *Lost Mountain* (乌鲁布铁, 2015) and Liu Yujia's *The Pale View of Hills* (远山淡景, 2018), my own documentary *Twilight Over the Silent Hill* highlight the crucial role of Indigenous documentaries in reinterpreting and reconstructing ethnic identities within a modern context. These works not only challenge the mainstream discourse that tends to essentialize and alienate minority ethnic groups but also showcase the resilience and creativity of Indigenous cultures in adapting to an ever-changing environment.

Through their aesthetic choices and narrative strategies, these documentaries vividly capture the complex emotions and experiences of minority ethnic groups in negotiating cultural identity amidst rapid social change. Focusing on intimate details of daily life, such as traditional attire, rituals, and language use, underscores the enduring significance of cultural heritage in shaping Indigenous self-awareness and community belonging.

Moreover, these documentaries highlight the agency and subjectivity of minority ethnic groups in representing their own stories and perspectives. Through

participatory and reflexive filmmaking practices, Indigenous documentary filmmakers reaffirm their “visual sovereignty”, challenging the long-standing cultural representation power imbalances. This empowering process not only aids in the transmission and innovation of minority ethnic cultures but also promotes cross-cultural understanding and dialogue.

However, as this chapter points out, the reconstruction of ethnicity in the context of modernization is an ongoing process filled with tension and uncertainty. While some traditional cultural practices are revived and adapted to new social realities, others risk marginalization or disappearance. The weakening sense of ethnic identity among the younger generation in the Northeast, as observed by some filmmakers, calls for more attention and reflection.

This chapter argues that documentaries about minority ethnic groups in Northeast China provide valuable insights into the diverse dynamics of cultural identity reconstruction under the impact of modernization. By revealing the expressions and experiences of minority Indigenous peoples, these works invite us to rethink mainstream narratives of progress and development and envision alternative paths for cultural continuity and innovation. As visual anthropologist David MacDougall posits, “The value of visual anthropology may not lie in capturing the ‘truth’ of cultural differences but in revealing the basis on which such differences are constructed” (MacDougall, 1998, p.245). In this sense, documentaries about the minority ethnic groups of Northeast China not only witness the changing realities of Indigenous cultures but also spark critical thinking about the concept of ethnicity in today’s world and its ongoing transformations.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

Review of Research Background and Research Question

Globalization and modernization have significantly impacted the cultural identities of Northeast China's ethnic minorities. Traditional ways of life, such as hunting and nomadic practices, were being replaced by agricultural and industrial activities. This shift, along with the migration of younger generations to urban areas, threatens the continuity of these cultural practices and identities. Modern media and consumer culture further marginalized and distort minority representations. In this context, visual storytelling has emerged as a crucial tool for cultural preservation and expression. Ethnographic documentaries offer these communities a platform to narrate their own stories, countering the dominant cultural homogenization. These narratives not only documented everyday life and cultural traditions but also highlight the resilience and adaptation of ethnic minorities amid modernization.

My approach is similar to methods used in video and documentary creation, where each artistic practice I undertake begins with experiential engagement and reflective thought throughout the process. The core question of this doctoral study is: What is the intrinsic connection between land and the identity of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, and how do land stories influence the creative choices of Indigenous visual storytellers? Specifically, I explored how local elements contribute to the development of visually sovereign narratives. This involved examining how the components of Northeast ethnographic documentaries relate to Indigenous visuality and storytelling. To clarify my research approach, I asked: What unique visual styles and elements are presented in Northeast ethnographic documentaries, and how do these styles and elements achieve cultural coherence and authentic representation? By

analysing Gu Tao's *Aoluguya* series. I highlighted the distinct visual aesthetics and narrative strategies employed to convey these communities' complex cultural realities. This study demonstrated how Indigenous visual narratives serve as a powerful medium for cultural preservation and identity reconstruction, enabling Northeast China's ethnic minorities to document their traditions and redefine their cultural identities in the face of globalization.

Research Findings

Integrating Indigenous Methodologies

In my study, integrating Indigenous methodologies was fundamental to exploring the cultural identities and practices of Northeast China's ethnic minorities. I adopted a multifaceted approach grounded in Indigenous research principles, drawing heavily on the works of scholars such as Jo-ann Archibald, Shawn Wilson, and Dorothy Christian. These methodologies emphasise relational accountability, cultural respect, and community engagement, aligning closely with the traditions and values of the communities studied.

One specific method employed was "Storywork", as articulated by Archibald. "Storywork" involves using storytelling as a means of knowledge transmission and cultural preservation. During my fieldwork in Shifosi Village, I conducted in-depth interviews and collected oral histories from local community members. While interviews and oral histories are widely used in qualitative research, applying them through the lens of Storywork allowed me to honour the oral traditions of the community member and engage in a reciprocal, relational approach to knowledge gathering. For instance, through the stories shared by elders about the historical significance of local landmarks, I was able to gain insights into the community's connection to the land and how these narratives shape their collective identity.

Moreover, Wilson's concept of relational accountability guided my interactions with the community. This principle underscores the importance of building respectful, reciprocal relationships with research participants. In practice, this meant that my research was not just about extracting information but involved a continuous exchange of knowledge and support. For example, I participated in local cultural events and community activities, which helped build trust and facilitated a deeper understanding of the community's way of life.

Christian's emphasis on Indigenous aesthetics also influenced my approach to visual documentation and representation. By incorporating cultural elements such as traditional attire and ceremonial practices into my documentary work, I ensured that the visual narratives were authentic and resonant with the community's cultural heritage. This method proved effective in portraying the lived experiences of the ethnic minorities in a way that respected and upheld their visual sovereignty.

Integrating these Indigenous methodologies provided a holistic framework for my research, enabling a deeper, more respectful engagement with the communities and offering new perspectives on their cultural practices and identities.

Ethnographic Documentaries, Cultural Congruency, and Visual Sovereignty

Ethnographic documentaries were central to my exploration of cultural congruency and visual sovereignty among Northeast China's ethnic minorities. By documenting the lived experiences, traditions, and evolving identities of these communities, these films aimed to provide an authentic representation that honours their perspectives.

A key focus was on ensuring cultural congruency in this visual narrative. For example, in analysing of Gu Tao's *Aoluguya* series, I highlighted the details of the Evenki people's daily lives and their profound connection to the land. This series

portrayed their transition from traditional hunting practices to contemporary livelihoods, emphasising how they maintain cultural continuity amidst change. By including elements like traditional clothing, rituals, and interactions with the natural environment, the documentaries preserved the cultural essence of the community while showcasing their adaptability.

Visual sovereignty played a crucial role in these projects. The concept supported by scholars including Jolene Rickard and Michelle Raheja, advocates for Indigenous control over their own representation. In my documentary *Twilight over the Silent Hill*, I collaborated closely with the Sibe community, ensuring that their voices and stories were central to the narrative. This involved not only filming their cultural practices but also incorporating their interpretations and explanations, thus providing a platform for them to articulate their identity on their own terms.

The ethical engagement was integral to achieving this. By building trust and fostering reciprocal relationships, I ensured that the community members felt respected and valued throughout the filmmaking process. This approach helped to counteract the often exploitative practices seen in traditional ethnographic research, where the community members' voices are frequently marginalized.

Navigating Modernity and Indigeneity

While exploring the complex interplay between modernity and Indigeneity in the context of Northeast China's ethnic minorities, the work of scholar Shao Dan has provided a crucial historical and theoretical lens. Through her in-depth analysis of the transformation of Manchu identity across different historical periods, including the Qing Dynasty, the Republic of China, the Japanese puppet state of Manchukuo, and the People's Republic of China, Shao reveals the profound impact of sovereign politics and ethnic discourse on the construction of minority identities.

Shao's research resonates strongly with the themes that emerged in my own interviews with ethnic minority cultural practitioners and community members in Northeast China. Her work sheds light on the ongoing challenges of cultural preservation and adaptation faced by many minority communities in the context of rapid modernization and social change.

One of the key insights from Shao's work is the way in which the Manchu and other ethnic minorities in Northeast China have had to continually renegotiate their relationship with the dominant Han Chinese society and the broader political and ideological frameworks of the modern nation-state. As Shao argues, this process has often involved a complex balancing act between the desire for cultural autonomy and the need to adapt to the demands of the modern world.

This tension between tradition and modernity was a recurring theme in my own interviews, as exemplified by the reflections of Zheng Jinling, a member of the Korean ethnic minority in Northeast China. In our conversation, Zheng spoke candidly about the challenges of maintaining a sense of cultural identity and distinctiveness in the face of homogenizing pressures of modernity, while also emphasising the resilience and adaptability of ethnic minority communities in navigating these challenges.

Shao's historical analysis provided a valuable context for understanding the contemporary experiences of ethnic minorities in Northeast China, highlighting the ways in which current struggles for cultural recognition and self-determination are rooted in longer histories of political and social transformation. By situating the voices and experiences of my interviewees within this broader historical and theoretical framework, my research aims to provide a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of the complex interplay between modernity and Indigeneity in Northeast China.

Land and Identity

As I examined the relationship between land and identity among the Indigenous communities of Northeast China, I have discovered a profound and multifaceted connection that is both material and spiritual in nature. Through extensive fieldwork and ethnographic interviews in the village of Shifosi, I have sought to understand how the land serves as a fundamental source of cultural identity, social belonging, and collective memory for the ethnic minority groups in the region.

One of the examples of this connection is the villagers' stories about the Buddha statues and the history of Qi Xing Shan. These narratives are more than just historical accounts; they are imbued with the community's collective memory and spiritual beliefs. The story of the Buddha statues, for instance, is a tale passed down through generations, symbolizing protection, faith, and a deep-rooted connection to the community members' heritage. It speaks to the villagers' reverence for the land as a sacred space that holds their cultural and spiritual history.

The history of Qi Xing Shan, as narrated by the villagers, reveals a profound sense of place and identity. The mountain is not just a geographical feature but a symbol of their ancestral roots and cultural continuity. The legends associated with Qi Xing Shan are integral to the community's identity, providing a sense of belonging and continuity that transcends the physical landscape.

Recording these oral histories was a powerful reminder of how land serves as a repository of cultural memory and identity. The villagers' stories are rich with symbolic meaning, reflecting their intertwined relationship with the land. This relationship informs their cultural practices, social structures, and worldview, highlighting the land's pivotal role in maintaining cultural integrity.

Furthermore, these narratives underscored the importance of preserving these stories

for future generations. As modern influences reshaped traditional ways of life, maintaining this connection to the land becomes increasingly vital. The villagers' efforts to keep their stories alive through oral traditions and cultural practices are acts of resilience and resistance against cultural erosion.

The Cultural Significance of Visual storytelling

By recording and analysing these interviews, I explored how modernity challenges local cultures and how land plays a vital role in shaping cultural identity. Visual storytelling emerged as a powerful medium to address these challenges, providing an approach to document and express the unique cultural landscapes of these communities.

For instance, one of my interviewees, Professor Liu Lihong, emphasised the profound impact of the regional environment on artistic creation. He articulated how the natural surroundings, historical landmarks, and cultural traditions of Northeast China deeply influence local artists. Liu pointed out that artists often use subtle technical adjustments in their work to convey authentic emotions and stories connected to their cultural roots. These adjustments might include specific colour palettes, textures, or compositional techniques that resonate with the local landscape and cultural narratives.

During my fieldwork, I integrated these elements into my documentary to reflect the cultural heritage of the communities I studied. In documenting the traditional festivals and daily lives of the local communities, I aimed to capture not just the visible aspects but also the intangible cultural essence. For example, in documenting Shifosi Village, the portrayal captures the villagers' rituals and daily activities, embedding the emotional and spiritual connections they have with their land and traditions. This approach helps preserve collective memory and identity of these communities,

ensuring that their stories and traditions are not lost amidst the pressures of modernization and globalization.

Visual storytelling provides a platform for these communities to articulate their perspectives and experiences. This form of storytelling is particularly significant in an era where visual media is a dominant form of communication. By harnessing the power of visual storytelling, these communities can reach wider audiences, both within and outside China, fostering greater understanding and appreciation of their cultural identity.

Research Contributions and Implications

This research significantly contributes to the application and expansion of Indigenous theories within the Chinese context. By integrating Indigenous methodologies and perspectives, I have explored how these approaches can be adapted to fit the distinctive cultural and social landscapes of Northeast China's ethnic minorities. Central to this adaptation are the principles of respect and reciprocity, which are foundational to Indigenous research methodologies. Following these principles, the research undertaken so far has established a strong methodological and theoretical foundation for future work, particularly in refining approaches to participatory storytelling, deepening engagement with Sibe and Manchu communities, and expanding the application of Indigenous research methodologies in China. The lessons learned from this project, including the importance of sustained community relationships, ethical considerations in visual sovereignty, and the role of oral traditions in identity construction will guide the next phase of research, ensuring that it remains both methodologically rigorous and community driven.

Additionally, this work foregrounds the importance of orality and storytelling in knowledge transmission, following Archibald's approach, which stresses the role of

narrative-based knowledge systems (Archibald, 2019). In the context of Northeast China, oral traditions remain a critical medium for preserving and transmitting cultural knowledge. By incorporating these oral narratives into the research, this study highlights how Indigenous epistemologies shape historical memory and identity formation.

One of the key insights from this research was the critical role of visual storytelling in cultural preservation and Indigenous self-representation. Through my documentaries and visual narratives, I have demonstrated how these communities use visual media to document traditions, articulate identities, and challenge dominant narratives of cultural homogenization. This approach not only helps preserve cultural heritage but also empowers Indigenous communities to assert control over their visual representation. Moving forward, this research will extend into collaborative and co-creative filmmaking practices, refining methodologies that center community-led storytelling. Further exploration into visual sovereignty, participatory filmmaking, and Indigenous media strategies will ensure that the impact of this research extends beyond academic discourse into practical, community-driven applications.

Furthermore, this project underscores the importance of power dynamics, ethical considerations, and researcher positionality in cross-cultural studies. Engaging with Indigenous epistemologies requires ongoing reflexivity and ethical accountability, particularly in contexts where historical power imbalances have shaped knowledge production. My fieldwork necessitated constant negotiation of trust, cultural sensitivity, and collaborative ethics, elements that will continue to inform my future research engagements. The methodological frameworks established in this study, grounded in relational accountability, participatory ethics, and mutual exchange will serve as a foundation for refining ethical protocols in Indigenous research and community collaborations.

Fieldwork and documentary practice presented a distinct set of challenges, such as

navigating cultural differences, ensuring informed consent, and addressing logistical constraints. A particularly illustrative example occurred during my filming of a traditional funeral, where I consulted with community elders about the customs surrounding participation and documentation. This experience reinforced the necessity of culturally responsive research methods that prioritize local customs and Indigenous agency. Future research will build on these lessons, expanding ethical frameworks for collaborative ethnographic filmmaking, decolonial visual methodologies, and Indigenous-led knowledge production.

By addressing these areas, this research will contribute to the growing body of Indigenous studies by offering a localized framework for adapting Indigenous methodologies within China. By focusing on visual sovereignty, participatory storytelling, and the integration of Indigenous epistemologies with Eastern holistic philosophies, this work challenges dominant research paradigms and introduces new methodologies for decolonial ethnography.

Future Research Directions

Building on the foundational work undertaken in this doctoral research, future studies will prioritize depth over breadth, focusing on immersive ethnographic engagement with the Sibe and Manchu communities. The current study engaged with Shifosi primarily as a collective cultural space, exploring its broader Sibe identity through historical and material culture, such as the abandoned Westward Migration Square and the Sibe Cultural Museum. These sites are also featured in my documentary, where the sculptures in the square and the location of the stone Buddha statues serve as significant visual and cultural markers. However, deeper engagement with Sibe and Manchu individuals within the village remains a crucial next step. A one-year fieldwork period was insufficient to fully capture the complexities of these communities, their knowledge systems, and their perspectives on contemporary

Northeast Chinese identity.

According to Shao Dan (2011), the Manchu people have undergone multiple identity transformations throughout the process of modernization, with their ethnic identity being continuously redefined across different historical periods. This process not only contributed to the weakening of Manchu ethnic consciousness but was also deeply intertwined with the complexities of their Qing imperial legacy. Unlike Xinjiang and Tibet, where autonomous regions were established within the governance framework of the People's Republic of China, the Manchu did not gain a similar administrative structure. As a result, they lacked a formalized system of cultural and political protection, which left their identity more vulnerable to assimilation and external influences. Despite the absence of strong institutional recognition at the national level, the identity of the Manchu and Sibe has nevertheless been profoundly shaped by shifting land policies across different historical periods.

Through a combination of archival research, oral histories, and ethnographic engagement, further study will examine land policies in shaping Manchu and Sibe identity, tracing their impact from the Japanese colonial period through the land reforms of the People's Republic of China and beyond. By analysing how different governance models have influenced the social structures, economic patterns, and cultural continuity of these communities, this study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the ways in which land policies have functioned as a central force in the transformation of ethnic identity.

One important dimension of this further research involves understanding the continuity of Sibe cultural practices in contemporary Northeast China. In this regard, collaboration with Dai Wenqiang will provide deeper insights into the persistence and evolution of Sibe cultural elements within the broader framework of Northeast Chinese identity. By bridging the Sibe and Manchu communities in Shifosi Village with urban practitioners of traditional archery, this research will explore how

traditional Sibe practices continue to shape and adapt within contemporary cultural landscapes. This comparative perspective will reveal deeper insights into how heritage and identity are negotiated across shifting social contexts.

By contrasting internal self-identification with external interpretations, this further research will offer new insights into the fluidity of ethnic boundaries and the role of regional migration in shaping identity politics. This approach builds upon existing theories of ethnic identity negotiation while introducing a localized framework that accounts for China's specific governance models and historical path. Investigating ethnic consciousness from both within and outside these communities will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how identity shifts across generations and regional contexts. As Li Tie observed, there is a gradual weakening of ethnic identity from Heilongjiang to Jilin to Liaoning, making it essential to explore how regional dynamics influence Indigenous identity experiences in Northeast China.

The further study will also explore the potential to apply Indigenous research methodologies across other academic disciplines. Integrating Indigenous perspectives is crucial. Teaching students about their ancestral cultures through art not only fosters a deeper appreciation of heritage but also enriches creative expression. However, some aspects of Indigenous knowledge systems, such as their emphasis on connections to the natural environment and community, may not align with the objectivity and standardized methods favored in traditional academia. This contrast has contributed to the rise of "land-based education" in Canada, which seeks to integrate Indigenous knowledge into academic frameworks in a more harmonious way.

Promoting interdisciplinary research that bridges Indigenous studies with technology, media, and communication can amplify Indigenous voices on a global scale, while also acknowledging that these cultures are dynamic and evolving, not static relics. Digital platforms should reflect this vitality. Additionally, respect for cultural

autonomy is essential. It is essential for Indigenous communities to retain control over how their cultures are represented, ensuring that technology empowers rather than dominates. By fostering collaboration and supporting Indigenous leadership in content creation, digital technologies can become powerful tools for preserving the authenticity and living nature of these cultures.

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Filmography

Aoluguya, Aoluguya. (2007). Directed by Gu Tao. [Documentary]. China:

Independent production.

The Last Moose of Aoluguya. (2013). Directed by Gu Tao. [Documentary]. China:

Independent production.

The Last Shaman. (1993). Directed by Sun Zengtian. [Documentary]. China: China

Central Television (CCTV).

The Long Season. (2023). Directed by Xin Shuang. [Television Series]. China:

Tencent Video. Production company: Tencent Penguin Pictures.

Lost Mountain. (2015). Directed by Gu Tao. [Documentary]. China: Independent production.

Lucky Dog. (2008). Directed by Zhang Meng. [Feature Film]. China: China Film

Group Corporation, Beijing Forbidden City Sanlian Film Distribution Co., Ltd.

Production company: Changchun Film Studio.

The Pale View of Hills. (2018). Directed by Liu Yujia. [Documentary]. China:

Independent production.

The Piano in a Factory. (2010). Directed by Zhang Meng. [Feature Film]. China:

Beijing Forbidden City Sanlian Film Distribution Co., Ltd. Production

companies: Liaoning Film Studio, Perfect World (Beijing) Pictures Co., Ltd.,

Dalian Hongyuan Film and Television Media Co., Ltd.

Tie Xi Qu. (2003). Directed by Wang Bing. [Documentary]. China: Independent

production.

Yuguo and His Mother. (2010). Directed by Gu Tao. [Documentary]. China:

Independent production.

Appendix

Appendix One

Consent Form

Indigenous Research on Northeastern China Culture-Visual Narrative/Filmmaking

Consent to take part in research.

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that participation involves: Being recorded, filmed, and having conversations/telling stories with investigators about traditional stories, folks, and their influences on Northeast visual culture. Indigenous knowledge and modern visual culture in filmmaking. Northeastern representation in visual narrative/filmmaking.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.

- I agree to my interview being audio/video recorded.
- I understand that all the information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity will remain anonymous. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that disguised extracts from my interview may be quoted in the researcher's (Zhang Hengtai) dissertation, conference presentation, or published paper.
- I understand that if I inform the researcher that myself or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to the relevant authorities - they will discuss this with me first but may be required to report with or without my permission.
- I understand that signed consent forms and original audio/video recordings will be retained in digital form in the researcher's (Zhang Hengtai) encrypted external mobile drive. Located in Shenyang China. In the researcher's own private space. Only the researcher and the research team have the right to access the data for 5 years, which ensures that the research results can be maximized while maintaining the security and confidentiality of the data during the researcher's lifetime.

- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for 5 years (2028).
- I understand that under freedom of information legalization I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.
- I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant

Date

Signature of researcher

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix Two

Full version of documentary *Twilight Over the Silent Hill*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7KsywhxSVw>