

# GIVING A VOICE TO MINORITY: PRACTICAL EXPLORATION OF ETHNOGRAPHIC ANIMATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Ethnographic animation, a novel form of visual ethnography, is capable of recording and representing traditional cultures, experiences, memories and other non-textual historical materials and cultural elements of ethnic minority groups. As a medium tasked with recording facts, how to ensure that the content displayed by ethnographic animation is true and accurate is an issue that animators need to pay attention to. Based on the author's ethnographic animated short film Longhorn Miao's Love Songs, this paper demonstrates that establishing a balanced relationship between etic and emic perspectives and applying participatory design methods in the process of ethnic animation practice can effectively help community members express their cultural views and voice through animation, thus showing the cultural interpretation of ethnic minorities to the greatest extent. The research results of this paper will provide a reference paradigm for animation practice related to ethnic minorities.*

## KEYWORDS

*Ethnographic Animation, Cultural Balance, Participatory Design.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

UNESCO declares that cultural diversity refers to the common heritage of humanity; it is as necessary for humankind as biodiversity is for nature, so its defence is recognized as an ethical imperative indissociable from respect for the dignity of the individual [1]. However, the acceleration of globalization has brought challenges to the inheritance and protection of ethnic minority cultures in China. One of the predominant reasons is that the vast majority of ethnic minorities do not have written language, so cultural and historical content was passed down through oral traditions. Affected by mainstream culture, the younger generation of ethnic minority members gradually left their hometowns to live in cities, so they were unable to learn traditional culture through mentoring and apprenticeships as was the norm previously. In response to this problem, ethnographic animation is used as a comprehensive art form combining audio-visual to record the culture of ethnic minorities. This makes up for the shortcomings of documentaries in displaying content such as dictation and memory. Animation can be seamlessly embedded in people's lives through mobile smart phones, breaking time and space limitations, and helping ethnic minorities to learn their traditional culture

Trace the origin of Chinese minority-themed animations, in the 1980s, Shanghai Art Studio produced a number of animated short films with the theme of minority oral stories, thus opening up the horizon of Chinese animation performance. The lack of cooperation with ethnic minorities in the animation production process has led to some errors in the ethnic costumes and props displayed. For instance, the animation *Huo Tong* (1984) with the theme of Hani folklore, according to the author's interviews and investigations on the Hani people, he found that the knives worn by the animated characters are not in accordance with the shape of Hani knives.

Therefore, in order to avoid a misinterpretation of ethnic minority culture, it is necessary to build a cooperative relationship of mutual promotion between the animator and ethnic minorities, so as to ensure that ethnic minority culture is presented in a correct form throughout the animation. *Longhorn Miao's Love Songs* is an ethnographic animation co-authored by the author with Longhorn Miao (the smallest group of Miao people), which records the traditional marriage culture of Longhorn Miao. This article begins from the practice process of *Longhorn Miao's Love Songs*, and demonstrate the effectiveness of the cultural balance construction between etic and emic and the application of participatory design in displaying minority views and cultural interpretation, thus expanding the practice method of minority-themed animation, and enabling minorities as active participants and expressing their voices through animation

## **2. THE BALANCE OF EMIC AND ETIC PERSPECTIVES IN ETHNOGRAPHIC ANIMATION**

Unlike the live-action documentaries which are specialized in recording real objects, ethnographic animation pays more attention to the use of artistic images to show oral culture, memory and other content that cannot be captured by cameras. In order to present these contents more realistically and objectively, it is necessary to take into account the cognitive biases of researchers and community members on cultural contents. Specifically, due to differences in living environments and growth experiences, community members and modern urban researchers have different understandings and perceptions of minority cultures, especially intangible oral cultures. In this regard, through the well-balanced cooperation of the emic and etic perspectives, the produced documentary could demonstrate the culture more effectively.

The concept of emic and etic was derived from the linguistic terms “phonemic” and “phonetic” by Kenneth Lee Pike in 1954, the former refers to the meaning of sounds held by local language users, and the latter refers to the analysis of language structure by linguists [2]. Later, with the application of emic and etic to anthropological research, anthropologists further conducted strict self-reflection on the reliability of individual field experience, the explanatory power and integrity of inductive cognition, etc., and promoted the subject-object research method. In specific anthropological practice, the emic viewpoints from community members and the etic viewpoints of researchers or animators are not contradictory, on the contrary, they are embedded in each other, thus forming a complete anthropological knowledge system [3]. In the creation of *Longhorn Miao's Love Song*, to minimize the influence the researchers' misunderstanding and stereotypes and maximize the culture reality, the balance between emic and etic viewpoints should be regarded as a principle in the overall practice process. For example, in the background music design, the researcher (etic) proposed that an ancient folk song should be synchronized to the animation videos in the opening of the film through the professional knowledge. Through the guidance of the community members, the researcher was able to select the most representative ancient folk song, the *Hong Shui Tao Tian (The Love in the Great Flood)*, which is about the origin of the Miao people.

Another example is the dressing design. In this part, the community members (emic) contributed to describe the marriage custom stories or memories. Meanwhile, the researcher (etic), contributed to investigate and visualize the key oral materials such as character modelling, scenes, and props, and restoring these materials with animation. The community members and the researcher worked together to select seven most representative clothe suites of Longhorn Miao which covers the suites of different genders (men or women), ages (kids, adults and seniors) and occasions (casual, festival or ceremonial). Through the cooperative work, we were able to properly document the costume culture of the Longhorn Miao.



Figure 1. Ancient Longhorn Miao women's and men's clothing (1), old Longhorn Miao women's and men's clothing (2), young Longhorn Miao women's and men's festival clothing (3), men's casual wear (4).

The last example is the background scenario design. Based on the professional knowledge, the researcher designed a storyboard in which the foreground characters (married couple) gradually age while the background buildings simultaneously shift from ancestral thatched cottage to the stone-and-brick house at present. To realize this storyboard, the community members provided the raw materials through guidance in the investigation of the abandoned buildings and oral description of their original appearance. Finally, the researcher animated the storyboard of the aging couple and building style evolution.



Figure 2. The image of the couple in *Longhorn Miao's Love Songs*.



Figure 3. The image of Miao marriage in *Longhorn Miao's Love Songs*

Apparently, an ideal ethnographic animation needs well-balanced emic-etic relationship. For this purpose, the researcher should develop a harmonious partnership with the community members by 1) fully respecting the community members; 2) avoiding preconceived perceptions or stereotypes; 3) being tolerant of cultural differences; 4) being active to resolving estrangement.

### 3. PARTICIPATORY DESIGN METHODS OF ETHNOGRAPHIC ANIMATION

When animation is applied to the realm of documentary, the fictional nature of animation is seemingly contradictory to its mission of documenting. However, if the unique imaginative and inspiring expression methods of animation are employed properly, e.g. under the guidance of the culture bearer, the animation film could demonstrate the delicate memories and thoughts more efficiently than the live-action films. As proposed by Paul Wells, 'animation prioritizes its capacity to resist realism as a mode of representation and creates numerous styles fundamentally about realism using its various techniques' [4]. Animated documentary is not an intact copy of the factual record, but describes facts through re-enactments and reconstructions, enhancing the visual experience with rich and intense artistic means while maintaining reality. Therefore, in order to describe the marriage culture of Longhorn Miao while highlighting the artistic aesthetics of community members, we analysed relevant participatory ethnographic videos and adopted participatory design methods to optimize the expression of *Longhorn Miao's Love Songs* in practice.

The participatory videos origin from *The Fogo Process* (1967) in which the local Fogo Islanders (subject) were given the cameras so that their voices are delivered directly instead of through the researcher. Namely, participatory video became an "empowerment" tool for minority rights [5]. In the field of animation production, more and more productions also adopt the concept of participatory video. For example, Nina Sabnani's *Tanko Bole Chhe (The Stitches Speak)* 2009) which won the Best Short Film 2011 of Society for Visual Anthropology, *They Call Us Maids: the Domestic Workers' Story* (Dunn & Wragg 2018) which won the Short Film Award in The London Feminist Film Festival (2016), and animations (2015) by Ibrahim Adepoju based on Yoruba native folktales from southwestern Nigeria [6]. In these animation productions, subject

persons or volunteers provided feedback at different stages of production, which provided an important basis for the presentation of animation content and the evaluation of animation quality. Considering the particularity of the recorded groups, it is necessary to explore more directional practice methods on the basis of participatory cooperation. As Longhorn Miao's culture is mainly oral communication, and the goal of promoting ethnic minorities younger generation to learn their own culture through animation, in the practice of *Longhorn Miao's Love Songs*, we hope that community members are not only purveyors of cultural information or feedbacks in the practice of animation, but as active filmmakers in all the stages in the animation production including interviewing, scripting, art design, animation making etc. This is similar to "participatory design" in industrial design, in which the potential buyers are invited to every design step to ensure that their needs are satisfied [7]. Consequently, by organizing community members to actively participate in the production of ethnographic animations, it is more beneficial to show the thematic cultural interpretation of ethnic minorities. In the practical production process, the participants fell into two groups. The first group was the young villagers (G1) who are familiar with both the local Miao language and Mandarin (standard Chinese language). They formed a local inspection team to participate in the animation production, and to communicate with the local people. The second group was the senior villagers (G2), who are familiar with the marriage customs and oral culture of the Longhorn Miao. G2 participants were selected by G1 participants. G2 participants' memories and description of Longhorn Miao marriage customs served as the thematic content of the *Longhorn Miao's Love Songs*. The above criterion was designed to ensure that the film's content was both accurate and representative.

In the fieldwork, the assistance of G1 participant is extremely important in effectively acquisition of the raw materials. First, the G1 participant assisted in the design of the semi-structured interview. A semi-structured interview is consisted of the closed question section and the open question section, where a well design closed question section could effectively define the scope of the interview without losing important information while the open question section could encourage respondents to answer freely, thus representing the respondents' perspectives beyond the pre-conceived ideas of the researchers themselves [8]. Apparently, the G1 participants is important in designing the proper closed questions and encouraging the G2 participants in the open question section. In addition, the G1 participants suggested the divide the interviewing process into two phases which was found to be effective. As suggested, in phase 1, we carried out random one-on-one interview with a larger number of G2 participants (c.a. 50). After phase 1, G1 participants and the researcher analysed and adjusted the subjects to be included in the short film and shortlisted the G2 participants to c.a. 20 (labelled as "informants" hereafter) according to the subjects for more specific and deeper interview. Through this effective participatory field work, several mistakes in earlier documentaries were successfully figured out. For example, in the scene describing the pray for the newlyweds with a rooster (ritual props), the first picture drawn by G1 and the author is that the elder hold the rooster and wave it on the left and right sides over the newlyweds. In a further interview later, we discovered that in traditional weddings, the rooster should be circled over the couple.



Figure 4. interviewing the Longhorn Miao community members.

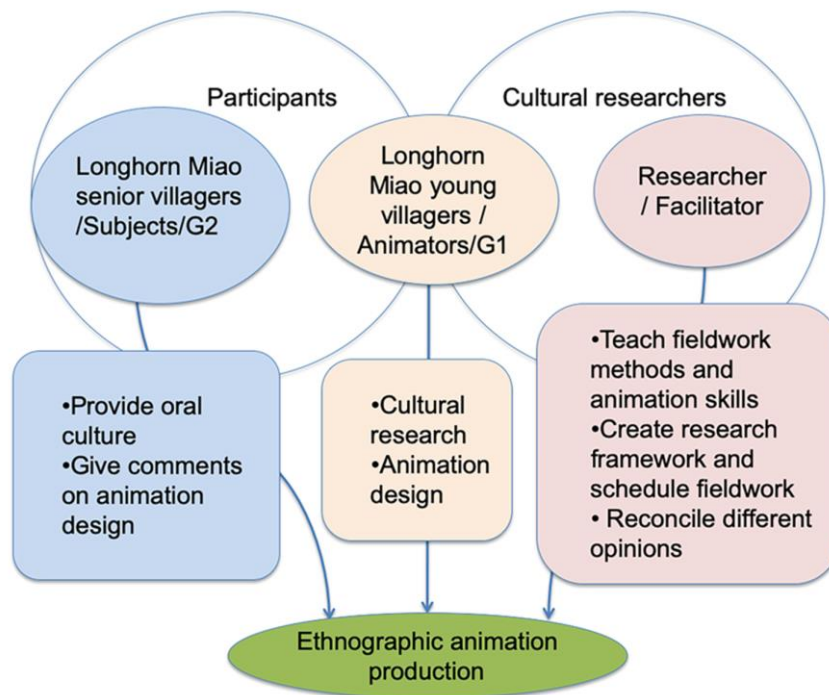


Figure 5. The relationships and respective works of participants and researchers.

After successful interview, The G1 participants are also involved in the character design, background design and storyboard design to ensure that the animation meets the aesthetics of the Longhorn Miao. Next, the G1 participants were taught the basic knowledge of animation production and encouraged to embed their own art in the animation expression. Finally, after the animation film was produced, the G2 participants were regularly invited to review the film and provide feedbacks, so as the finalized film followed the cultural consensus of the Longhorn Miao community. Through these measures, the perspectives and default knowledge of the local culture could be faithfully revealed.

## 4. CONCLUSION

As a new form of visual ethnography, ethnographic animation has great potential in expressing oral culture, memory and history through creative images. At the same time, it can be used as a medium for the dissemination of ethnic minority culture in museum exhibitions and cultural learning and exchange activities to promote the sustainable development of ethnic minority culture.

In terms of practical methods, in order to ensure the authenticity of the cultural content displayed by animation, we highlight the importance of emic-etic balance and participatory design through the experience in producing the *Longhorn Miao's Love Songs*. To realize emic-etic balance, the ethnic minorities should be directly involved in animation production so that their status is turned from subject person to active filmmakers, which can strengthen their own voice in presenting their generally underrepresented culture and worldview to others. Through our experience, the following practical guidelines are summarized which can serve as a model for reference.

- 1.The plans should be developed with the participants;
- 2.The animation techniques could be taught to participants;
- 3.Semi-structured multi-phase survey could be used in fieldwork;
- 4.Regularized review and feedback from the participant should be considered in adjusting the final film.

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