

Research on the Ecological Discourse Framework of Micro-Drama Empowered Cultural and Tourism Integration

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Abstract

As a new medium, micro-dramas have provided an innovative path for the integration of culture and tourism in the context of the global cultural and tourism industry's pursuit of sustainable development and the profound transformation of digital media. However, they also bring many problems due to content homogeneity, single evaluation indicators, and lack of ecological awareness. Therefore, this study, by using the theory of ecological linguistics, constructs an E-TALE analysis model that includes five dimensions: environment, text, audience, linking, and effect, aiming to provide a tool for evaluating cultural and tourism micro-dramas that takes into account narrative depth, communication effectiveness, and ecological sustainability. The E-TALE model is applied to the typical case of Homeward Journey with the Wind to verify its effectiveness and operability in practice. The research confirms that high-quality cultural and tourism micro-dramas need to achieve the narrative transformation of local cultural symbols through "Stories to Live By discourse" and build a multi-subject collaborative ecosystem, providing a research path for promoting the high-quality and sustainable development of the cultural and tourism industry.

Keywords: ecolinguistics, micro-dramas, integration of culture and tourism, E-TALE analytical model, Stories to Live By discourse, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

The establishment of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism in 2018 marked the entry of China's cultural and tourism sector into a new phase of deep integration. Concurrently, the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (SDGs) has endowed the cultural and tourism industry with a renewed contemporary mission, requiring it to transcend economic growth and holistically achieve multiple objectives, including promoting sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth (SDG 8), building inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities and human settlements (SDG 11), and fostering sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12)[1]. This signifies that the current integration of culture and tourism is shifting from "scale expansion" to "quality enhancement," from "resource consumption" to "conservation and revitalization," and from "passive sightseeing" to "responsible engagement."

Against this backdrop, digital technology is reshaping the forms of cultural dissemination and tourism experiences. Micro-dramas, an emerging form of online audiovisual content characterized by episodes typically lasting between one to fifteen minutes with complete narratives, have rapidly emerged as a new vehicle for cultural and tourism communication due to their "short, concise, and fast-paced" nature, strong dramatic appeal, multi-modal expression, and high social interactivity. Compared to traditional promotional videos, micro-dramas demonstrate unique advantages in cultural and tourism integration: through narrative empowerment, fragmented cultural symbols are integrated into compelling plot frameworks, achieving "soft dissemination" of culture; through experience preconditioning, a sense of presence is created in the cloud, stimulating audiences' intention for on-site visits; and through IP incubation, serialized "story universes" are constructed, forming long-term cultural tourism brands.

However, the current development of cultural tourism micro-dramas is rapid, but theoretical research and practical level are significantly lagging behind. Existing studies mostly start from the perspectives of communication and economics, focusing on commercial monetization and network flow, while neglecting in-depth discussions on the cultural connotations, ecological values, and social impacts of narratives content. In practice, there are widespread problems such as content homogenization, low efficiency in industrial transformation, and insufficient sustainable

development momentum. Especially in some cities with rich resources but weak narrative construction, where tourists “pass through more but stay less”, there is an urgent need to establish a set of analytical tools that can measure narrative depth and promote sustainable development.

Ecolinguistics provides a useful perspective to fill the above research gaps. This theory emphasizes the interdependence between language and the environment [2], and critically examines how mainstream discourse influence people’s cognition of nature and the world[3]. Stibbe’s[4] “Stories We Live By discourses” further points out that the discourse system should promote life well-being, ecological balance, and social equity. This perspective provides an important ethical reference for this study to evaluate the value orientation of micro-drama narratives.

Therefore, this study aims to construct a systematic analytical framework—the E-TALE model (Environment-Text-Audience-Linking-Effect)—from an ecolinguistic perspective, to decode the intrinsic mechanisms and practical ethics of how micro-dramas empower cultural and tourism integration. The model will be validated using the successful case *Homeward Journey with the Wind*, providing theoretical support and practical pathways for the high-quality development of cultural tourism in the similar cities.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Current Research and Gaps in Cultural Tourism Micro-Drama Studies

Research on micro-dramas has experienced exponential growth over the past two years. As of March 2025, there are 233 relevant publications indexed in the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), with the majority focusing on journalism, communication, drama, and film studies. Only 16 in-depth studies originate from the discipline of tourism. Existing research has preliminarily explored the media characteristics of micro-dramas [5], their application mechanisms in cultural tourism [6], and experience optimization strategies based on flow theory [7].

At the practical level, the development of cultural tourism micro-dramas can be divided into three phases: 1.0 Simple Implantation Phase (2020–2022): Cultural and tourism elements served as background props. 2.0 Organic Integration Phase (2023–2024): Emergence of destination-customized dramas. 3.0 Ecosystem Construction Phase (2025–present): Focus on building a systematic industrial chain from content to industry. Typologically, these micro-dramas can be categorized into landscape display, cultural narrative, experiential interaction, and IP derivative types.

However, significant research gaps remain in two aspects: First is the theoretical aspects, including the disciplinary perspective remains singular, lacking in-depth engagement with linguistics, particularly ecolinguistics; value assessments are one-sided, overlooking the narrative’s humanistic and ecological dimensions; theoretical innovation lags behind, failing to transcend the conventional framework of film and television theory. Second is the practical aspects, including content homogenization is prevalent, with a notable absence of in-depth case studies tailored to specific cultural ecosystems; the industrial transformation chain remains fragmented; project sustainability is weak, predominantly characterized by one-off investments.

2.2 Theoretical Development and Applications of Ecolinguistics

Ecolinguistics originated from Haugen’s [2] metaphor of “language ecology”, which field shifted toward a critical examination of dominant discourses in the 1990s, propelled by scholars such as Fill and Mühlhäusler. Stibbe [4] developed an analytical framework centered on “stories,” “ideologies,” “frames,” “metaphors,” “evaluations,” and “identities,” explicitly defining “Stories We Live By discourses” as those that promote well-being, ecological harmony, and social equity.

Domestic research progress focused on introducing and localizing Stibbe’s theories. Han Jun[8] advocated for establishing a “Chinese School of Ecolinguistics.” Research has mainly followed two directions, one is about Ecological discourse analysis, critically examining discourse construction in Chinese media on issues such as the environment and animals[9]; the other is about Language ecology and biodiversity conservation.

In addition, ecolinguistics provides both ethical criteria (e.g., life-sustaining discourse ethics) and analytical methods (e.g., multimodal ecological discourse analysis, critical/positive discourse analysis) for examining micro-dramas. It prompts critical questions: Do the “stories” conveyed by micro-dramas reinforce stereotypes or foster vibrant place identities? Do their narratives contribute to cultural preservation, community well-being, and tourist accountability?

2.3 Positioning of This Study

This study aims to address the aforementioned theoretical gaps by systematically applying ecolinguistics to the analysis of cultural tourism micro-dramas as an emerging form of digital storytelling. Through the development of an E-TALE model, it seeks to operationalize theoretical tools, thereby providing scholarly support and practical guidance for sustainable practices in the integration of culture and tourism.

3. Construction of the E-TALE Analytical Framework

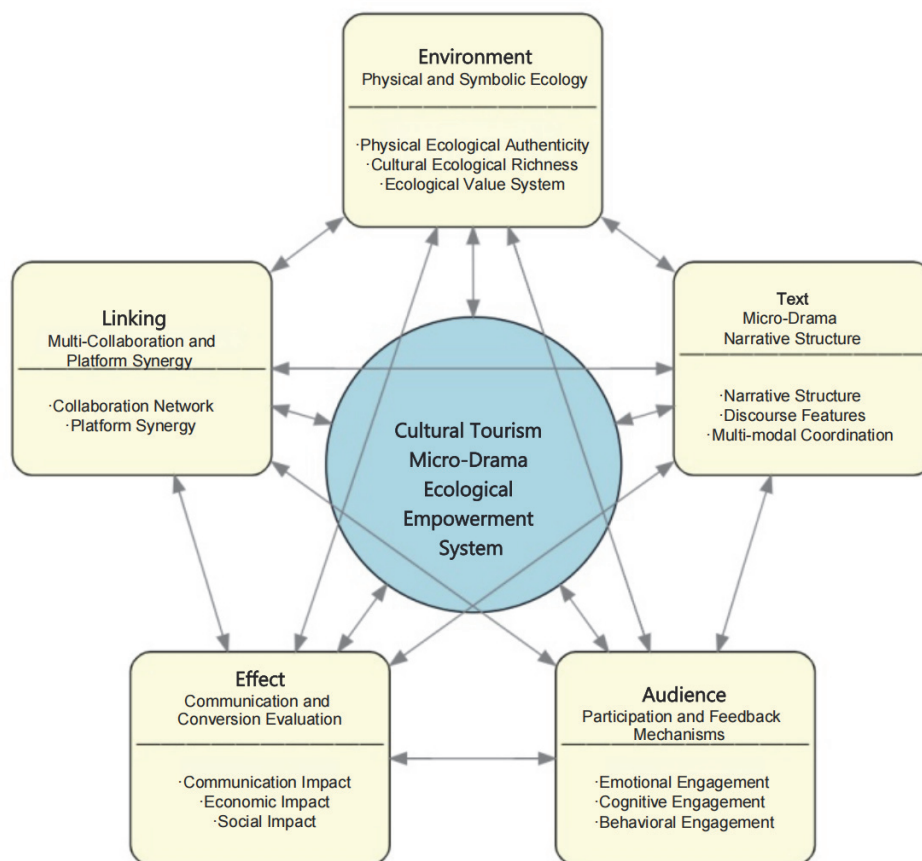
3.1 Theoretical Foundation and Construction Logic

The development of the E-TALE model stems from the inheritance and evolution of core ideas in ecolinguistics. It incorporates Haugen’s ecolinguistic perspective, Stibbe’s “stories-we-live-by” approach and “discourse of sustainability” ethics, while also integrating distributed language views (emphasizing the “emergence” of meaning through organism-environment interactions), Propp’s theory of narrative functions, reception aesthetics’ “reader-response” theory, collaborative governance theory, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) impact assessment framework.

The model is constructed according to four guiding principles: systematicity, dynamism, operability, and criticality. It aims to form an organic analytical system capable of comprehensively and dynamically evaluating the cultural-tourism empowerment effects of micro-dramas.

3.2 Core Dimensions and Indicator System of the E-TALE Model

The E-TALE model comprises five interrelated core dimensions: Environment, Text, Audience, Linking, and Effect. For specific content, please refer to the figure.



Core Objective: To promote the construction of "Stories We Live By discourse" and achieve the sustainable development of cultural and tourism integration.

Figure 1. E-TALE Model

The E-TALE Modal showed above aims to systematically examine the intrinsic connection between the narrative dissemination and ecological value of cultural tourism micro-dramas. This framework consists of six interrelated dimensions, which together form a complete analytical system.

At the center of the framework lies the "Cultural Tourism Micro-Drama Ecological Empowerment System," which conceptualizes micro-dramas not as isolated communication tools but as organic ecosystems where internal elements are interdependent.

In the "Environmental" dimension, we focus on the physical and symbolic ecology. This specifically includes physical ecological authenticity, cultural ecological richness, and ecological value system. This dimension emphasizes that the narrative content should reflect the real ecological environment while carrying profound cultural connotations.

The "Text" dimension focuses on the narrative structure and micro-drama. We analyze their narrative structure, discourse features, and multi-modal coordination. These elements jointly determine the form of content presentation and the effect of dissemination.

The "Linking" dimension examines the multi-collaboration and platform synergy. This includes collaboration network and platform synergy. It is related to resource integration and communication efficiency.

The "Audience" dimension focuses on the participation and feedback mechanisms. We assess the degree of interaction from three levels: emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement. This is an important indicator for measuring the effectiveness of communication.

A complete evaluation system is established for the "Effect" dimension. We conduct a comprehensive assessment from three directions: communication, economic, and social impact. This helps to comprehensively judge the actual value of micro-dramas.

The core objective of this framework is to promote the establishment of a discourse system in line with the concept of "life stories", and to facilitate the sustainable development of cultural and tourism integration. Through the systematic analysis of these six dimensions, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the ecological language features of cultural and tourism micro-dramas, providing a theoretical basis for their quality improvement.

4. Case Analysis Based on the E-TALE Framework

Following the establishment of the theoretical framework for the "Cultural Tourism Micro-Short Drama Ecosystem Empowerment System," this chapter aims to empirically validate the analytical efficacy and practical guidance value of the framework through a representative success case. The study selects the micro-drama *Homeward Journey with the Wind* as the analytical subject, which has emerged as a benchmark work in the "micro-drama + cultural tourism" model due to its remarkable achievements in cultural dissemination and tourism conversion. By systematically applying the five dimensions of the E-TALE framework—Environment, Text, Audience, Linking, and Effect—to dissect this case, we can not only deconstruct the intrinsic mechanisms of its success but also verify the practicality and scientific rigor of the framework in diagnosing the ecological health of micro-dramas and interpreting their empowerment pathways.

4.1 Environmental Dimension: In-depth Construction of Physical and Symbolic Ecology

The success of *Homeward Journey with the Wind* primarily lies in its immersive restoration and narrative transformation of the "physical and Symbolic ecology" of Leshan, Sichuan.

Authenticity of Physical Ecology: The series was entirely filmed on location in Leshan. The majestic distant views of the Leshan Giant Buddha, the vibrant local atmosphere of Zhanggongqiao Food Street, and the everyday scenes of Emei East Gate Street collectively form a tangible, perceptible, and explorable physical space. This high degree of scene authenticity avoids the common "backdrop" effect in film and television production, creating a strong sense of presence for the audience.

When applying the "environment" dimension of this framework, the research found that this series of micro-dramas demonstrated a rich cultural ecosystem. It went beyond simple landscape displays and organically wove the production processes of intangible cultural heritage delicacies such as Qiaojiao Beef and Sweet Skin Duck, as well as traditional crafts like face-changing and tie-dyeing, into the main narrative. This dense and multi-layered presentation of cultural symbols significantly enhanced the cultural image depth of Leshan as a "City of Gastronomy" and a "City of Slow Life".

From the perspective of the "ecological value system", it can be seen that the narrative core conveys deep values of respecting traditions, returning to authenticity, and pursuing harmony between humans, nature, and society. The

protagonist in the drama escapes the fatigue of the city and finds healing in the gentle pace and human warmth of Leshan. This plot setting reflects a profound reflection on the fast-paced industrialized lifestyle, and behind it lies a distinct "existentialist" ecological ethics orientation[4]. This value transmission is precisely the concrete practice of the "life story" discourse advocated by ecological linguistics.

4.2 Textual Dimension: Narrative Practice of "Stories We Live By Discourse"

At the textual level, the series successfully transforms local cultural symbols into "Stories We Live By discourse" that drives the story through meticulous narrative design.

Narrative Structure Metrics: The series adopts a composite structure of "focused main plot with scattered subplots." The main plot follows the female protagonist Xu Youfeng's return to her hometown to fulfill a friend's last wish, skillfully intertwining subplots such as culinary exploration, personal growth, and emotional reconciliation. Its narrative arc of "conflict-healing-growth" fully depicts the character's psychological journey from "imbalance" to "rebalance," aligning with the audience's psychological need for emotional comfort and spiritual return.

From the perspective of "text", this micro-drama exhibits a distinct ecological language style. For instance, it frequently employs words like "hometown flavor", "human touch", and "down-to-earth", all carrying positive emotional connotations. These terms collectively construct a core metaphor: "The city is a place of wandering, while the hometown is the true destination." This metaphorical framework not only effectively reveals the interpersonal alienation problem existing among modern people but also profoundly extols the life wisdom rooted in local knowledge. Such discourse practice is a vivid embodiment of the "Stories We Live By" discourse that ecological linguistics focuses on [4].

From the perspective of multi-modal coordination, the visual, auditory, and linguistic modalities achieve efficient synergy. For example, close-up shots endow food with a strong visual impact, rich environmental sound effects create an immersive street atmosphere, and some philosophical dialogues between characters all highlight the theme. These three modalities reinforce each other, jointly constructing a warm and soothing aesthetic style. This coordination mechanism significantly enhances the emotional appeal of the narrative, making it easier for the audience to resonate. Multi-modal discourse analysis theory holds that such synergy is the key to efficient meaning transmission [10].

4.3 Audience Dimension: Deep Engagement from Emotional Resonance to Behavioral Transformation

The series precisely triggers multi-level and multi-dimensional engagement mechanisms among its audience.

Emotional Engagement Metrics: Social media comment sections are filled with audiences sharing personal experiences of drifting in cities like Beijing and Shanghai, as well as emotional setbacks, such as comments like "Xu Youfeng's confusion reminds me of myself", forming an emotional resonance community based on shared life experiences.

Cognitive Engagement Metrics: The series serves as a window for audiences to learn about Leshan's culture. Many viewers expressed that through the series, they gained insights into the history and craftsmanship of Qiaojiao Beef, shifting their perception of Leshan from merely a tourist destination to a city with depth and warmth.

Behavioral Engagement Metrics: Most compelling is the behavioral engagement it inspired. "Eating in Leshan with Homeward Journey with the Wind" became a popular online check-in guide, with audiences translating online emotional resonance into offline tourism consumption and secondary creations (e.g., food check-in videos), completing the transition from viewer to tourist, and from consumer to disseminator.

4.4 Linking Dimension: Synergistic and Symbiotic Ecosystem Operation

Homeward Journey with the Wind is not an isolated work but the product of collaborative efforts from multiple stakeholders.

Collaboration Network Metrics: The project formed a "golden triangle" of "policy guidance-platform production-professional execution." The National Radio and Television Administration's "Travel with Micro-Dramas" creation plan provided policy endorsement and creative direction; the Douyin platform offered traffic distribution and topic operation support; and Huace Television ensured professional production quality. This deep collaboration among diverse entities guaranteed the project's artistic, communicative, and policy coherence.

Platform Synergy Metrics: Douyin launched the dedicated topic #Homeward Journey with the Wind Leshan Food#, using algorithms to precisely target users interested in food, travel, and healing content. This created a virtuous cycle of "official topic guidance-user UGC co-creation-algorithmic redistribution," significantly enhancing communication efficiency.

4.5 Effect Dimension: Significant Achievement of Comprehensive Benefits

In terms of impact, the series achieved a triple success in communication, economic, and social benefits.

Communication Impact Metrics: The series garnered over 1.9 billion views across platforms, and millions of interactive comments, demonstrating outstanding performance.

Economic Impact Metrics: According to data from Leshan's cultural and tourism department, after the series aired, local scenic spots saw a year-on-year increase in tourist visits, and catering consumption at filming locations, effectively converting content popularity into real economic gains.

Social Impact Metrics: The series enhanced the cultural pride of local residents and won the third prize in the "2024 International Micro-Drama Competition," signifying international recognition of its cultural value and artistic quality. It provides a successful paradigm for promoting local culture nationally and globally.

4.6 Success Attribution and Optimization Directions

The success of *Homeward Journey with the Wind* can be attributed to its outstanding performance and systemic synergy across the five dimensions of the E-TALE framework. Rather than merely using cultural and tourism elements as a backdrop, the work deeply integrates them as the driving force and soul of its narrative, constructing a virtuous ecological closed-loop from content origination to industrial transformation.

Despite its notable achievements, future works of a similar nature may further enhance their impact through the following aspects:

Environmental Dimension: There is potential to further explore the aquatic culture and maritime history of Leshan as a confluence of three rivers. By incorporating richer ecological symbols, the theme of "homeward journey" can be imbued with greater historical depth.

Text Dimension: The dramatic conflict and integration between the protagonist's professional values and the life philosophy embodied by Leshan could be intensified. This would elevate "Stories We Live By discourse" beyond personal emotional healing to a profound reflection on modern lifestyles.

Linking Dimension: It is possible to collaborate with local restaurants and boutique hotels with a long history to launch co-branded products derived from this series. Such measures can more accurately and sustainably transform online interactions into offline consumption and brand assets, thereby strengthening a more stable "content - industry" symbiotic relationship.

5. Conclusion

The E-TALE model constructed in this study has made an expansion of the theory of ecological linguistics in the cross-field of digital humanities and cultural tourism. It has transformed the ethical concept of "Stories We Live By"[4] into an operational tool with five dimensions and multiple specific indicators. This transformation compensates for the deficiencies in theoretical perspective and value assessment in existing research.

At the practical application level, this model can be used to analyze successful cases such as *Homeward Journey with the Wind*. Its design concept is highly consistent with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The model integrates the requirements of Goal 8, 11, and 12 into micro-narrative assessment and path design, which enables cultural tourism micro-dramas to contribute to sustainable economic growth, cultural heritage protection, and responsible consumption practices.

For numerous cultural and tourism cities in China, adopting micro-dramas is not only about keeping up with the media trend, but also an opportunity to reshape local cultural narratives and promote the transformation of the industry toward higher-quality and more sustainable development. Future research can conduct empirical tests based on this framework, explore the empowering potential of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, and enhance the integration of cross-cultural communication perspectives. Though these efforts, the analytical tool can be continuously optimized, jointly promoting the innovative and integrated development of culture and tourism in digital age.

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