

# Research on the 21st-century literature of the ‘Three Minor Ethnic Groups’

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**Abstract:** China is a country with many minor ethnical groups. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, especially since the opening and reform, the literatures of minor ethnical groups have made great progress in their development, among which three northern minor ethnical groups—Daur, Evenki, Oroqen, which are collectively referred to as the Three Ethnic Minorities are unique. In home and abroad, much and extensive attention have been paid by literature researchers to whether their collection and processing of folk literature or continuous new writers and their new works. Especially with the dramatic rise of the study on Inner Mongolian grassland culture in the 21st century, the studies on the Three Ethnic Minorities' literature, as the important component of grassland culture, have made significant achievements. However, there still exist some problems in the studies, such as the insufficient quality and quantity and the unbalanced distribution of the research results, and the inadequate depth and extension of the literature critique.

**Keywords:** 21st century, The Three Ethnic Minorities, Folk literature, Written literature

## 1. Introduction

The literature of the Chinese nation is composed of the literature of 56 ethnic groups, each of which has made its own significant contribution to the literary treasury of the Chinese nation and humanity. Throughout their long development process, the literature of these 56 brotherly ethnic groups has had a relatively independent history and has also been influenced by other ethnic groups, with historical records of such interactions. The historical contributions of each ethnic literature and their interrelationships are often of special interest to researchers. Entering the 21st century, in the great construction project of advanced culture of the Chinese nation, and in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region's efforts to create a grassland cultural brand and actively promote the construction of a cultural region, the literature of ethnic minorities, as an important part of grassland culture, has increasingly attracted the attention of researchers. Its study has become a major trend in academia, with a series of academically valuable results emerging and research methods becoming increasingly diverse. The "three less ethnic groups," the Daur, Evenki, and Oroqen, "due to their unique historical and existential experiences, the development of this group's literature is also quite special and has widely attracted the attention of critics and literary researchers" [1]. Especially since the 21st century, the literature of the "three less ethnic groups" has not only received widespread attention but also produced distinctive research outcomes.

### 1.1. The literature of the Daur People: a parallel study of folk and written literature

The Daur people are mainly distributed in the Daur Autonomous Banner of Morin Dawa, Meilisi Daur District in Qiqihar City, Heilongjiang Province, and the Evenki Autonomous Banner, with a few living in Xinjiang and Liaoning. The Daur do not have their own ethnic script, and before the middle of the Qing Dynasty, their literature was entirely oral, that is, folk literature. Therefore, from ancient times to modern times, the mainstream of Daur literary development has always been the rich and diverse folk literature. Because Daur folk literature was not recorded in writing, the versions that have been passed down are also varied and colorful.

Since the 21st century, studies on "Daur Uqin" (a narrative art form of the Daur people) and oral stories have shown a multi-faceted character, mainly including image comparison, structural analysis, and prototype exploration.

Xi de Fu, in his article "On the Personification of Horses in Daur Folk Stories," analyzes that in Daur folk stories, horses are often personified, with special language, emotions, and behaviors attributed to them. Horses are symbols of wisdom and ideals; they represent vitality and luck, and they are messengers bringing vitality and hope to the world. In the early spiritual life and thinking activities of the Daur people, "horses were worshipped as mascots," "horses became the supreme object of worship," and "as a sacred and fantastic spiritual product, on the one hand, it condenses the collective wisdom of the Daur people's early spiritual life; on the other hand, it represents the goodness and beauty of the world." [2] Some scholars have proposed the concept of "Northern Frontier Pastoral Culture" to describe the attributes of Daur traditional culture, which is "based on the natural environment, composed of various industrial cultures to form a self-sufficient production and lifestyle; pursuing harmony between man and nature, man and man, and the harmony of one's body and mind; taking the concept of harmony as the ethical standard and social law. The ecological type of production and lifestyle and the ethical type based on the concept of behavior form a unified pastoral cultural trait." It includes agricultural culture, animal husbandry culture, hunting culture, fishing culture, handicraft culture, etc. [3]. Therefore, facing such a variety of cultural forms, whether the "horse" in animal husbandry culture can be regarded as the object of worship for the Daur people is still open to discussion.

De Hong ying's article "The Primitive Religious Elements in the Traditional Folk Stories of the Daur People" uses ethnic theory to explore the influence of the primitive religious thoughts of the Daur people on their own folk stories from four aspects: nature worship, spirit worship, soul worship, and shaman worship. The author, in analyzing "spirit worship," believes that there are many "Weng Gu Re" worshipped by the Daur people (the Daur language calls the worshipped spirits "Weng Gu Re"), which can be summarized into three categories: animal Weng Gu Re, plant Weng Gu Re, and heroic ancestor Weng Gu Re, especially "the Daur people regard their heroic ancestors as extremely powerful deities to be worshipped. Gradually, the worship of heroic ancestors has become more and more prominent, making the Daur folk stories also full of 'heroism' color." The paper concludes by pointing out: "The beliefs and worship in the folk stories of the Daur people all originate from the concept of shamanism. The natural worship, spirit worship, soul worship, and shaman worship of shamanism permeate oral literature, giving the Daur folk stories a distinct ethnic characteristic." [4] It should be said that the classification of the original religion of the Daur people in this article is quite reasonable, but the downside is that the article neither provides a detailed explanation of the concept of shamanism nor distinguishes between the concepts of shamanism, shaman, and shaman culture, so its conclusion is a bit abrupt.

Since the middle of the Qing Dynasty, the literature of the Daur people has begun to appear in the form of literary creation in Manchu, that is, written literature. Especially with the birth of New China, a new chapter in the literature of the Daur people has been opened, changing the historical situation where folk literature was dominant and causing a great change in the literature of the Daur people. Since the reform and opening up, the creation of written literature by the Daur people has shown a rich and unique style: First, a creative group with a wide range of living areas and a reasonable team of writers has been formed; second, a large number of female writers represented by Sana, Zhang Hua, Su Hua, Su Li, Su Ya, A Feng, Ao Wenhua, Ao Ji Hong, Da La, Su Xiaoying, and Du Juan have emerged; third, there is a new situation of diversified development in creative themes, genres, forms, performance techniques, and artistic styles; fourth, various languages and characters reflect the anxiety, pain, and sense of floating under urban civilization of the Daur people in the process of urbanization. The academic community has paid some attention to this and has achieved some increasingly theoretical research results.

Since the 21st century, there have been two master's degree theses in the overall study of the creation of written literature by the Daur people, which are important results worth paying attention to: In 2014, Zhang Nan's master's degree thesis "On the Novel Creation of Female Writers of the Daur People in the New Period of Inner Mongolia" believed that in the contemporary new period, "female writers of the Daur people rely on their unique regional attributes, speak for their own nation through literary creation, and adhere to and value the culture of the Daur people, introducing to the majority of readers the regional status and customs of the Daur people, which are different from other ethnic groups." Especially "they have made explorations

in narrative patterns and material selection, and have outlined stories and portrayed images through distinctive ethnic languages, thereby reflecting the tragic fate of the characters." [6] In 2018, Wang Chunhua's master's degree thesis "A Study on the Creative Psychology of Novel Writers of the Daur People in the New Period of Inner Mongolia" explored the creative psychology of novelists of the Daur people in the new period of Inner Mongolia, and believed: First, the novelists of the Daur people in the new period of Inner Mongolia are based on their own hometowns, and have two main characteristics of strong national complex and sentimental compassion in their creative psychology; second, the influence of the natural environment, religious beliefs, nourishment of folk literature, and the call of national mission and historical responsibility are the main reasons for the formation of the creative psychology of the writers of the Daur people; third, the creative psychology of the novelists of the Daur people in the new period of Inner Mongolia has undergone a continuous development and deepening evolution of national consciousness, humanistic care consciousness, and ecological consciousness. [7]

In the study of individual writers of the Daur people, Wu Xue li's "The Drifting Writer - A Discussion on the Female Writer Sana of the Daur People" is a more in-depth discussion of the writers of the Daur people. The author believes that on different writing faces, the female writer Sana of the Daur people shows multiple identities such as modern intellectual women, guardians of ethnic culture, and drifters of identity recognition. As a modern intellectual woman, she has criticized and questioned urban life, especially the male world; as a guardian of the cultural group, she has written about the "childhood" of humanity implied by the minority group, looking for the spiritual traditions of the nation that have been lost, the "roots of the nation" that have been lost, and also recorded the painful experiences of the minority group in the process of being forced to "modernity"; as a drifter of identity recognition, she "connects the painful experiences and rupture consciousness of the minority group and even the whole of modern China in the process of 'modernity'." Therefore, Sana has built her novel world with multiple identities, "her writing is not only of symptomatic significance to the literary writing of all ethnic minorities, but also has a meaningful dialogue with mainstream literature." [8]

## 1.2. Evenki literature: prominent research achievements in written literature

The Evenki, formerly known as Tungusic or Solon, are a people who are referred to as "those living in the great forests." They are primarily found in the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Heilongjiang Province, with the majority residing in the Evenki Autonomous Banner of Hulunbuir City. The Evenki have their own language but no written script, and have historically used Chinese, Manchu, and Mongolian scripts for literary creation. Evenki literature is divided into two main categories: folk literature and written literature.

The organization and excavation of Evenki folk literature started relatively late, and research in this area has also been delayed and weaker. As Professor Wang Li Zhen, a scholar of minority mythological studies in China, said: "The Evenki population is very small, and they have no written language of their own. They have used other ethnic scripts such as Manchu, Mongolian, and Chinese earlier in history. As a result, there is a widespread impression in academia that traditional myths of the Evenki are only a few scattered pieces, and some scholars even assert that 'the Evenki have no myths.' This perception has led to the near-total neglect of Evenki myths in mythological studies over a long historical period. All these situations indicate a fact: for many years, Evenki myths have not received in-depth research and interpretation." [13] Therefore, in her doctoral dissertation "A Study of Evenki Myths," Wang Li Zhen used comparative research methods and motif analysis to divide Evenki myths into three major mythological circles, and believed that "Evenki myths are a unique mythological existence with a distinct basis and special developmental trajectory. Centered around shamanic worship and shaped by a specific cultural environment, they continuously absorb the influence of myths from surrounding ethnic groups, thus forming a unique mythological system including origin myths, nature myths, totem myths, shaman myths, and hero myths, and demonstrating the value of world ethnic myth types and motifs." [13] Based on her doctoral dissertation, Wang Li Zhen published the monograph "A Study of Evenki Myths" in 2006. This monograph was highly praised by the famous northern ethnic folk literature research expert Manduhu, who believed that the monograph was pioneering and represented "the first in-depth study of Evenki myths in China and a welcome achievement in the study of minority folk literature." [14]

Since the 21st century, another significant achievement in the study of Evenki folk literature has been the doctoral dissertation "A Study of Evenki Hunting Stories" by Na Min, which for the first time focused on an important part of the oral tradition of the Evenki people - hunting stories. The paper points out that Evenki hunting stories have regional type characteristics, and different "story types reflect the local Evenki people's natural ecology, life trajectory, value orientation, and spiritual world"; there are two major themes in Evenki hunting stories: the human-animal relationship theme and the taboo theme. The human-animal relationship theme includes understanding of animals by people, coexistence of humans and animals, and human-animal marriage; the taboo theme includes fire god taboos and animal language taboos. The taboo theme forms an intertextual relationship with the taboo folklore in Evenki hunting production, and "the 'Morigen' image and forest imagery are the most dazzling and prominent aesthetic images in Evenki hunting stories." [15]

In addition, Wu Guihua's "A Strange and Unique Flower of Manchu-Tungusic Folk Literature - A Comparison of the Hezhe's Yima Kan and the Evenki's Folk Tales" ("Ethnic Literature Studies," Issue 2, 2001), Yan Sha qing's "A Preliminary Exploration of Evenki Folk Literature" ("Heilongjiang Ethnic Series," Issue 5, 2004), and Wu Tian xi's "A Brief Introduction to Evenki Folk Literature" ("Heilongjiang History and Geography," Issue 15, 2013) are also important achievements in the study of Evenki folk literature since the 21st century. Among them, Yan Sha qing's "A Preliminary Exploration of Evenki Folk Literature" believes that "Evenki folk literature, with its rich content, form, and profound cultural connotation, shows its unique strengths and characteristics" [16]. The paper also emphasizes the issues that should be noted in collecting and organizing ethnic folk literature according to the actual situation of the Evenki people: folk literature surveys must be combined with social and historical surveys to ensure the scientific nature of the literary materials obtained, learning and mastering ethnic languages, respecting ethnic customs, and the urgent need to protect the copyright of ethnic folk literary and artistic works.

It should be said that since the 21st century, the most prominent research achievements in Evenki literature have been in the study of works by Evenki writers, especially the research on Evenki writer Wuhetu and his works, which are not only numerous but also of relatively high quality. According to the "China Knowledge Network" literature search, since the 21st century, there have been 108 papers (18 master's theses) with "Wuhetu" as the theme; and 128 papers (21 master's theses) with "Wuhetu" as the keyword. These research results analyze and discuss Wuhetu and his works from multiple angles and levels, including ethnic writing, "ethnicity" writing, forest writing, cultural writing, dream writing, gender writing; ecological consciousness, writing consciousness, folk feelings; imagery, character images; shamanic beliefs, shamanic culture; comparative literature, interdisciplinary, linguistic geography, and geographical space construction. Among them, Cui Rong's "Analysis of Dream Writing in Wuhetu's Novels" believes that dream writing "runs through the entire creation of Wuhetu's novels," constituting a special dimension and symbolic feature of Wuhetu's novels. In the creative process of Wuhetu's novels, dreams are mainly manifested as "dreams that reflect reality, dreams that explore the ethnic character traits, and dreams that question the fate of the nation." It is precisely through dreams that the writer "finds not only the essence of the Evenki people but also literary themes such as the relationship between people and themselves, people and nature, and people and history, and constructs the Evenki ethnic image and the jungle literary world with this poetic means." [17] Li Wang's "Ethnicity, Generation, Gender, and Evenki Writing - A Comparative Study of Wuhetu and Chi Zijian" compares Evenki writer Wuhetu with Han writer Chi Zijian, who has included the Evenki people in his writing perspective, and believes that "due to the differences in ethnicity, generation, and gender between the two writers, the images of the Evenki people they portray are also different" [18]: Wuhetu starts from the predicament of his own nation and contemplates the fate of his people's survival, while Chi Zijian starts from external factors and childhood life experiences, and writes metaphorically about the life of the Evenki people; the former's ethnographic writing method changes with the change of the literary environment, and his writing about the Evenki people is male, while the latter's ethnography is carried out in his own literary writing context, highlighting the female perspective in the narrative. Hang Xi's master's thesis "A Comparative Study of Ecological Thought in the Novels of Wuhetu and Aitmatov" discusses the ecological thought of Wuhetu and the most accomplished Soviet ecological writer Aitmatov, believing that the two writers have many similarities in their novel creations and living environments, and their works contain both ethnic consciousness and ecological consciousness, but

"Wuhetu's ecological literature is not as deeply influenced by Aitmatov as Guo Xuibo and Zhang Chengzhi, his ecological thought is inherited from the ancient ethnic literary tradition that has never been interrupted from oral to written and consciously produced." [19]

## 2. 21st century ethnic literature review

In summary, looking at the research achievements of the literature of the "Three Minor Ethnic Groups" since the 21st century, although it has distinctly highlighted some characteristics of the literature of the "Three Minor Ethnic Groups" in terms of thematic nature, ethnicization, and artistry, when placed in the context of the entire field of Chinese literary research in the 21st century, it still reveals many shortcomings that deserve the attention of the academic community.

## 3. Conclusion

the literature of China's diverse ethnic groups has made significant contributions to the country's cultural tapestry. With the "Three Minor Ethnic Groups"—Daur, Evenki, and Oroqen—receiving notable scholarly focus, their literature, both oral and written, reflects their unique histories and cultural interactions. Despite the advancements in research, there remains a need for further exploration to fully integrate the study of these ethnic literatures within the broader Chinese literary sphere.

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