

# Innovative Research on Ethnographic Methods in Cross-Border Ethnic Social Work Practice: A Case Study of Social Work Stations in Yunnan Border Areas

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**Abstract:** With the acceleration of globalization and the advancement of modernization in ethnic region governance, cross-border ethnic social work practice has increasingly become a crucial domain in social governance. This study focuses on methodological innovation in cross-border ethnic social work practice, utilizing the Yunnan border areas as the research field to explore the applicability and innovative application of ethnographic methods in transnational social work. By analyzing challenges including cultural differences and social structural complexity in cross-border ethnic social work, the research proposes a culturally sensitive framework for social work practice and develops the "dual cultural broker" role theory, emphasizing the dual identity and mediating function of social workers in cross-cultural contexts. Additionally, the study creates a cultural competence assessment tool for cross-border social work, providing operational guidelines to enhance practitioners' cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication capabilities. Findings demonstrate that innovative application of ethnographic methods can effectively mitigate cultural misinterpretation and conflict in cross-border social services, offering new practical pathways for improving governance effectiveness in border regions.

**Keywords:** Cross-Border Ethnic Social Work; Ethnographic Methods; Dual Cultural Broker; Cultural Competence Assessment Tool; Yunnan Border Areas

## 1. Research Background and Objectives

Economic revitalization of border areas lies at the core of this initiative, encompassing two major components: comprehensive poverty eradication and the advancement of cross-border

economic cooperation. Through projects such as the construction of modern border "happiness villages" and "beautiful countryside" initiatives, border regions have historically bid farewell to absolute poverty. Preliminary achievements have been made in realizing the goals of "prosperous border residents, beautiful border landscapes, stable border societies, and secure border defenses," effectively integrating rural revitalization with border security and consolidation [1]. The 14th Five-Year Plan also emphasizes the need to "vigorously improve production and living conditions in border areas, refine the urban systems along borders, support the construction of border ports, accelerate the development of border-adjacent towns and transportation corridors, and promote the innovative development of border trade." [2] Border regions are often characterized by multi-ethnic communities, frequent cross-border ethnic interactions, and diverse religious beliefs. At present, the joint construction of the Belt and Road Initiative has entered a phase of high-quality development. Cross-border regionalization in border areas has become normalized, with increasing flows of people, trade, and resources [1]. Consequently, cross-border ethnic social work practices are increasingly emerging as a critical domain of social governance.

For a long time, cross-border ethnic regions have served both as zones of ethnic integration and border areas. Under China's open development paradigm, these regions have grown increasingly interconnected with neighboring countries' border societies. In the current landscape of interconnected and symbiotic development, neither domestic cross-border ethnic groups nor communities on either side of the border can isolate themselves through political boundaries, economic models, or cultural barriers [3]. Against this backdrop, social workers must navigate complex cultural

differences and socio-political structures. Traditional social work methods often fall short in addressing the unique needs of cross-border ethnic populations, particularly in these dynamic and interdependent environments.

Yunnan Province boasts a 4,060-kilometer border, segmented into Sino-Myanmar (1,997 km), Sino-Laos (710 km), and Sino-Vietnam (1,353 km) sections [4]. These areas encompass 25 border counties and 123 townships inhabited by cross-border ethnic communities [5]. At present, governance in China's border regions remains largely confined to a "top-down" administrative system, with limited space for social forces to participate. Social work, in particular, has yet to receive robust support or achieve full development in these regions, and its practical applications in this field remain underrecognized [6]. Taking Yunnan's border areas as an example, ethnic groups such as the Wa, Dai, Jingpo, Lisu, and Hani—archetypal cross-border migratory communities—possess cultural traditions rooted in profound historical legacies. These traditions serve as critical symbolic markers of ethnic identity. This cultural phenomenon not only reflects the cultural reconstruction of Yunnan's cross-border ethnic groups amid globalization but also offers valuable cultural tools for social work practice. However, traditional social work approaches often overlook cultural sensitivity and contextual adaptability when addressing cross-border ethnic issues, resulting in suboptimal service outcomes. This study aims to explore the innovative application of ethnographic methods in cross-border social work, grounded in field research conducted at social work stations in select Yunnan border areas. It delves into the challenges faced by cross-border ethnic social work and proposes solutions through the development of a "dual cultural broker" role theory, emphasizing social workers' mediating function in cross-cultural contexts. Additionally, it constructs a cultural competency assessment toolkit for cross-border social work, providing actionable guidelines to enhance practitioners' cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication skills. The research objectives include advancing theoretical innovation in social work methodology, addressing cultural misinterpretations and conflicts in cross-border services, and offering new pathways to improve the efficacy of borderland social governance.

## **2. Current Status and Challenges of Cross-Border Ethnic Social Work Practice**

### **2.1 Current Practices at Social Work Stations in Yunnan's Border Areas**

As critical hubs for cross-border ethnic social work, social work stations in Yunnan's border regions have gradually developed into a grassroots service network with significant scale and social influence in recent years, driven by policy support and societal demands. According to data from the official website of Yunnan Provincial Department of Civil Affairs, by June 2021, social work stations had achieved full coverage across all townships in the province, including 25 border counties and 123 border townships. These stations are primarily located in border townships, ethnic villages, and communities, serving major cross-border ethnic groups such as the Lisu, Wa, Hani, Miao, Jingpo, De'ang, and Dai. Through the "Five-Sector Collaboration" model (integrating community, social organizations, social workers, volunteers, and charitable resources), social work services have deepened their vertical reach and expanded their engagement with residents [4]. Key service areas include community governance, cultural preservation, educational support, livelihood development, and mental health services, aiming to enhance the social adaptation and cultural identity of cross-border ethnic groups through professional social work methodologies.

In practice, social work stations in Yunnan's border areas exhibit the following distinctive characteristics: The establishment of these stations is closely aligned with the unique cultural characteristics of local ethnic communities. For example, in Wa ethnic communities in Cangyuan County, social work stations incorporate ethnic cultural elements into their services by organizing wooden drum cultural experience activities, aiming to enhance ethnic identity and community cohesion. This approach not only demonstrates cultural sensitivity in social work practice but also provides culturally tailored social support for cross-border ethnic groups.

Secondly, the service model of social work stations has strong regional adaptability. Due to the complex geographical environment and social structure in border areas, social work stations generally adopt a "community-embedded" working method. By collaborating with local community organizations, schools,

and medical institutions, they have established a multi-tiered service network to enhance service accessibility and coverage. For instance, in February 2025, China's first "Borderland Social Work Demonstration Station" was inaugurated in Tengchong. This initiative, jointly established by the School of Ethnology and Sociology at Yunnan University, the School of Government Management at Baoshan University, and the Baoshan Municipal Social Work Department, represents a landmark achievement in university-local government collaboration. The station leverages the academic expertise and resources of the two universities in borderland social work to pioneer a new model of multi-stakeholder collaborative governance. This model helps dismantle traditional single-actor governance frameworks by introducing diverse stakeholders into the social governance of cross-border ethnic regions, thereby improving governance efficacy. Simultaneously, it is of great historical significance and value in promoting social governance innovation in cross-border ethnic areas, strengthening the training and exchange of social work professionals, enhancing understanding and respect among cross-border ethnic groups, and advancing social development in these regions. Additionally, social work stations prioritize the cultivation of intercultural communication skills. Many social organizations in border counties organize annual pre-service training programs, internships, and practical sessions focused on topics such as introductions to ethnic customs, religious beliefs, cultural taboos, policy analysis, and community engagement. These initiatives aim to equip social workers with the competencies to operate effectively in cross-cultural contexts, thereby mitigating risks of cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. Although the social work stations on the Yunnan border have achieved certain results, they still face challenges. First, Conventional social work approaches lack sufficient cultural adaptability in addressing cross-border ethnic issues. For instance, studies on the crossbow culture of the Lisu ethnic group in Gongshan County have revealed instances of cultural misinterpretations and practical deviations in social work interventions. Second, Social work stations struggle with uneven resource allocation and underdeveloped professional capabilities. Border regions lag in social work development due to shortages of human and financial resources,

weak professional autonomy, and incomplete policy frameworks for multi-stakeholder governance. Mechanisms for cross-sector collaboration remain inadequately institutionalized [4]. In addition, Cross-border ethnic social work requires stronger policy backing, particularly in fostering cross-regional cooperation and localized innovation. Current policies lack specificity in addressing the unique needs of borderland governance and cultural dynamics.

In summary, while the practices of Yunnan's border social work stations highlight the positive role of social work in cross-border ethnic governance, they also expose systemic issues such as cultural inadaptability, uneven resource distribution, and lagging policy support. Addressing these challenges demands not only continuous innovation by social workers but also collaborative efforts among policy makers, academic researchers, and residents of cross-border ethnic regions to establish a sustainable foundation for cross-border social work.

## **2.2 Cultural Misinterpretations and Practical Dilemmas in Cross-Border Services**

Cultural misinterpretation refers to the phenomenon of misunderstanding certain obscure or common issues in one's own or other ethnic cultures [7]. The root of cultural misinterpretation lies in cultural differences, which are based on one's own social norms, conceptual systems, and thinking paradigms, leading to a deviation from the actual understanding and evaluation of another culture. The occurrence of cultural misinterpretation is often due to cultural differences between the interacting parties, resulting in an insufficient understanding of each other's intentions [8]. The phenomenon of cultural misinterpretation fundamentally exists because of cultural gaps [9]. The emergence of cultural gaps among transnational ethnic groups is fundamentally caused by regional and cultural differences. Border regions have long been spaces for the production and livelihood of border residents, and they are also crucial areas for national security defense. The social issues in these regions often possess both ethnic and cross-border characteristics. Therefore, the ethical values practiced by social workers in this area cannot bypass "national will" and "cross-border ethnic identity." [10] For cross-border ethnic groups, although they originate from the same

ethnicity, sharing similar bloodlines, culture, and language, they belong to different countries and have distinct political beliefs and national consciousness. However, these political beliefs and national consciousness are not immutable but are continuously evolving and constructed through reference to their co-ethnics abroad [11]. Therefore, in the practice of social work with cross-border ethnic groups, misinterpretation of cultures frequently occurs, which is a common and complex issue directly affecting the effectiveness and quality of services. In the field of social work, cultural misinterpretation is mainly manifested as social workers' misunderstanding of the cultural background, political beliefs, historical memory, and symbols of cross-border ethnic groups, as well as a lack of sensitivity and adaptability to cultural differences during service provision. Such misinterpretations may not only lead to resistance from service recipients but also exacerbate cultural conflicts and weaken the intervention effects of social work.

As mentioned earlier, taking the wooden drum culture of the Wa ethnic group in Cangyuan as an example, the wooden drum is not only an instrument used during festival celebrations but also carries profound historical memories and cultural symbolism. In the historical legends of the Wa ethnic group, the wooden drum is considered a tool to communicate with the gods. In many traditional Wa villages, wooden drum houses are set up to transmit information by beating the drum during important ceremonies [12]. However, many social workers often overlook the historical origins and symbolic significance of the wooden drum culture in practice, simply viewing it as a traditional instrument or tool. This superficial understanding can easily lead to cultural misinterpretation. For instance, when organizing ethnic culture experience activities, if social workers treat the wooden drum as merely a display item without delving into its cultural connotations and symbolic meanings, or even allow participants to beat it casually, it may cause members of the Wa community to feel neglected or misunderstood, thereby affecting the acceptance and satisfaction of the services.

In the practice of social work among transnational ethnic groups, cultural misinterpretation may also manifest as a neglect of the social structure and cultural changes of these groups. For a long time, the Jingpo people

have experienced complex cultural restructuring against the backdrop of globalization, resulting in diverse expressions of their cultural symbols and practices in different countries and regions. For instance, in Myanmar and Laos, the Jingpo's Munao Zongge cultural festival has been disseminated and reconstructed through elite cross-dressing and cross-regional interactions, forming a culturally specific expression. However, many social workers in cross-border services often lack an understanding of this cultural adaptability, equating the cultural customs of transnational ethnic groups, leading to a disconnect or deviation of service content from the local cultural context, making it difficult to meet the actual needs of the service recipients and even causing misunderstandings.

In addition to cultural misinterpretation, social work practice in cross-border ethnic societies also faces a series of practical challenges. Firstly, traditional social work methods have clear limitations when addressing issues related to cross-border ethnic groups. For example, the Jingpo's children in Xishan, Mangshi, usually like to form informal groups. They are accustomed to gathering based on age, place of residence, hobbies, and family relations, engaging in activities and helping each other. They are not accustomed to one-on-one case services, especially when professional terms related to individual counseling are difficult to accurately translate into Jingpo language, often causing embarrassment or difficulty for the children, making precise one-on-one case services challenging. Traditional casework and group work models tend to overemphasize standardization and proceduralization, making them difficult to adapt to the complex cultural backgrounds and social structures of cross-border ethnic groups. This methodological limitation can lead to rigidity and mechanization in service delivery, making it hard to achieve cultural sensitivity and contextual adaptability.

Secondly, cross-border ethnic community social work practice also faces issues of uneven resource distribution and insufficient service capacity. Although social work stations have been fully established in townships in the border areas of Yunnan, field visits have revealed that many of these stations still lack adequate resource allocation and professional capacity, often remaining idle. As previously mentioned, due to the relatively low level of economic development in border areas, local governments

and residents have a delayed understanding of social work. The funding sources for these social work stations are limited, and there is a notable shortage of professional talent. This resource strain directly impacts the service capacity and innovative potential of social workers, leaving them ill-equipped to handle cultural differences and complex situations.

Finally, cross-border ethnic social work faces systemic challenges rooted in inadequate policy support. While national and societal attention to social governance in ethnic regions has increased in recent years, policy frameworks and institutional safeguards for cross-border ethnic social work remain underdeveloped. This gap is particularly evident in areas such as cross-border cooperation and the localized innovation of social work methodologies, where stronger policy guidance and resource allocation are urgently needed. The lagging nature and ambiguity of policies leave social workers without clear operational guidelines or safeguards in practice, undermining the sustainability and innovativeness of services. This issue has become especially pronounced during the initial phases of establishing social work departments across regions, highlighting the disconnect between top-down policy design and grassroots implementation realities.

In conclusion, cultural misinterpretation and practical challenges are core issues that need to be urgently addressed in social work practice with cross-border ethnic groups. Cultural misinterpretation is manifested not only in the neglect of cultural symbols and historical memory but also in the misunderstanding of cultural reconstruction and adaptive changes. Practical challenges mainly stem from the limitations of traditional social work methods, uneven resource allocation, and insufficient policy support. The presence of these issues not only affects the intervention outcomes of social work but also, to some extent, restricts the sustainable development of social work with cross-border ethnic groups. Therefore, how to solve these problems through innovative methods and construct a culturally sensitive framework for social work practice has become the focus and difficulty of this research.

### **3. Innovative Application of Ethnographic Methods in Cross-Border Social Work**

#### **3.1 Theoretical Construction of the Role of**

#### **Dual Cultural Agents**

The border regions are home to numerous ethnic groups, and even social workers who are members of these ethnic groups can clearly perceive cultural differences [10]. Thus, in the practice of social work with cross-border ethnic groups, cultural differences and the complexity of social structures make it difficult for the traditional social worker role to effectively address the challenges in cross-border situations. Based on field research and case analysis of social work stations in the Yunnan border area, this study proposes the "dual cultural broker" role theory, aiming to construct a culturally sensitive and context-adaptive social work practice framework. This theory emphasizes that social workers in cross-border cultural contexts need to not only act as cultural intermediaries but also possess cross-cultural communication and coordination skills, thereby building a bridge between different cultural systems to promote cultural identity and social integration.

The core of the role of a "dual-culture broker" is the social worker's deep understanding and flexible application of cross-border ethnic cultures. In practice, they need to possess professional knowledge of both local and international cultures, able to switch freely between different cultural contexts, and effectively convey and reconstruct cultural information. For example, when studying the Wa people's Lamu drum and oxen-slaughtering sacrifice ceremonies, social workers need to understand their symbolic meanings and cultural functions to avoid cultural misinterpretations in cross-border services, and to promote ethnic identity and social adaptation through the innovative use of cultural symbols.

The theoretical construction of this role is mainly based on the following key dimensions: First, social workers need to possess cross-cultural sensitivity, being able to recognize and respect values and behavioral patterns from different cultural backgrounds. Second, social workers need to master the ability of cultural translation (communication), being able to effectively transform and interpret symbols, metaphors, and practices from different cultural systems, thereby reducing cultural conflicts and promoting cultural integration. Additionally, social workers need to have the capacity for cultural innovation, being able to combine ethnic social work with digital social work based on maintaining the core values of a culture, making

adaptive adjustments to traditional cultural symbols and practices to meet the diverse needs of cross-border ethnic groups in modern society. In practical application, the theoretical value of the "dual cultural broker" role is reflected in the following aspects: First, it provides social workers with an operational theoretical framework to help them clarify their positioning and action strategies in complex cultural contexts. For example, in the practice of the Jingpo Munao Zongge culture, social workers can gain an in-depth understanding of the historical origins and symbolic meanings of the Munao Zongge culture to design social work service projects that align with the local cultural background, such as the "Children's Munao Zongge Team" and "DIY Munao Symbol Pillars." These projects guide and encourage Jingpo children to deepen their understanding of their ethnic culture, thereby enhancing the relevance and effectiveness of the services. Second, this role theory emphasizes the mediating role of social workers in cross-border cultural contexts. By facilitating the transmission of cultural information and reconstructing meanings, they promote understanding and cooperation among different cultural groups. For instance, in handling conflicts within cross-border marriage families in border areas, social workers must not only uphold the value of respecting ethnic cultures but also seek common "horizons" based on an understanding of their cultural values. This enables them to comprehend the problems and needs of their clients and assist cross-border marriage families in effectively resolving conflicts [13]. Furthermore, this theory provides social workers with a practical guide for assessing and enhancing cultural competence, helping them identify their strengths and weaknesses in cross-cultural communication and services, thereby targeting the enhancement of cultural sensitivity and professional capabilities. For example, when dealing with cross-border ethnic groups conducting illegal religious activities across borders, social workers should respect the freedom of religious belief while consistently adhering to the value concept of "multicultural integration." They should prioritize the "integration" of ethnic and national interests as the primary value to make correct judgments and timely effective interventions, actively maintaining national security, ethnic unity, and border stability [10].

The construction of the "dual cultural broker" role theory not only provides theoretical support for social work practice in cross-border ethnic communities but also offers a feasible practice path for social workers to achieve cultural sensitivity and situational adaptability in complex cultural contexts. The proposal of this theory not only promotes theoretical innovation in social work methodology but also provides an important theoretical basis for enhancing the quality and effectiveness of social work services in cross-border ethnic communities.

### **3.2 Development of a Cross-border Social Work Cultural Competence Assessment Tool**

In the practice of social work within transnational ethnic communities, the assessment of cultural competence is a crucial step in enhancing the professional quality and effectiveness of social workers. This section aims to explore how to develop a cultural competence assessment tool for transnational social work based on the theory of the "dual cultural broker" role. This tool is designed to help social workers identify their strengths and weaknesses in cultural sensitivity and adaptability, and to provide systematic guidance for improving cultural competence.

Through visits and surveys of several social work stations in border counties in Yunnan, such as Cangyuan, Ruili, Mangshi, Honghe, and Gongshan, it was found that social workers in cross-border cultural contexts often face issues such as insufficient cultural understanding, lack of cross-cultural communication skills, and limited cultural innovation abilities, which can easily lead to cultural misunderstandings and conflicts. These issues not only affect the quality of services but also, to some extent, restrict the role of social workers in cross-border ethnic social work. Therefore, developing a set of targeted and highly operational cultural competence assessment tools has become an important approach to addressing these problems. This study employs ethnographic methods to conduct field research on social work stations at the Yunnan border and, combining the case of the Jingpo Zoumo Dance culture, systematically analyzes the cultural competence of social workers. The assessment of cultural competence mainly includes five dimensions: cultural awareness, intercultural knowledge, practical skills, adaptive adjustment, and ethical sensitivity. (See Appendix for details.) Cultural

awareness, as a cognitive foundation, guides social workers to perceive their own cultural stance and differences; intercultural knowledge constructs a structural knowledge system, preventing cultural misinterpretation; practical skills transform cultural awareness and knowledge into service capabilities; adaptive adjustment addresses dynamic challenges in cross-cultural work, achieving localized services; ethical sensitivity ensures that cross-cultural practices adhere to professional ethics, handling moral dilemmas. Each dimension is interdependent and mutually influential. Cultural awareness runs through to provide guidance; intercultural knowledge offers intellectual support; practical skills reflect practical outcomes; adaptive adjustment promotes the development of all dimensions; and ethical sensitivity serves as a professional and moral safeguard, restricting the application boundaries of practical skills and ensuring cross-cultural communication follows the correct values.

In practical applications, questionnaires can be designed according to regional differences to assess the cross-cultural competence of social workers, helping them identify strengths and weaknesses in cultural competence and providing training directions for institutions. Through regular assessment and feedback, social workers can continuously optimize their cultural competence and enhance cultural sensitivity and situational adaptability in cross-border work. For example, when conducting sex education for adolescents in conservative religious border villages, this assessment tool can help social workers balance educational goals with cultural respect, accurately identify their own tendencies, master religious doctrines, establish trust with religious leaders, reasonably avoid religious activity times, and achieve educational goals.

In conclusion, the various dimensions of the cross-border cultural competence assessment tool in social work are closely related and interact with each other. They collectively form a comprehensive system of cross-cultural competence and play an important role in cross-cultural communication. The development of this assessment tool not only provides social workers with a practical guide to enhance their cultural competence but also offers significant theoretical support and practical pathways for the innovation of social work practice among cross-border ethnic groups. Social workers need to focus on the coordination and balance among

the various dimensions and continuously improve their cross-cultural competence to better meet the demands of cross-border social work.

#### **4. Conclusion of the Study**

Cross-border ethnic regions serve as vital conduits connecting China to the world through the "Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)" and act as pioneering zones for its collaborative implementation. As Yunnan Province strengthens its role as a strategic gateway to South and Southeast Asia, the deepening of BRI projects is fundamentally transforming the geopolitical positioning of its cross-border ethnic regions. Once perceived as peripheral borderlands, these areas are now emerging as frontiers of openness, creating unprecedented opportunities for cross-border ethnic social work. This field is evolving from a singular focus on ethnic social work into a multidimensional, cross-cultural, transregional, and systemic practice. Its functional orientation, structural frameworks, developmental vision, and innovative pathways must adapt to these shifts. Such transformation is not only an active response to the demands of the new era but also an imperative for fulfilling its contemporary mission. Amid this backdrop, cross-border ethnic social work is entrusted with a value consensus that upholds both ethnic specificity and cross-border interconnectedness. Through innovative collaboration and symbiotic development in social work practices, it strives to promote social peace and stability in border regions.

This study focuses on methodological innovation in cross-border ethnic social work in Yunnan's border regions. Through field research and case studies, it explores the applicability and innovative application of ethnographic methods, constructing a culturally sensitive social work practice framework. To address the cultural inadaptability of traditional approaches, the study proposes that social workers must develop cross-cultural sensitivity, translational competence, and innovative capacity. By establishing the "dual cultural broker" role and developing a cultural competency assessment toolkit for cross-border social work, the research bridges disparate cultural systems, fostering cultural identity and social integration. These contributions provide theoretical foundations and practical guidance for social workers

operating in complex cultural contexts, while offering novel pathways to enhance the efficacy of borderland social governance.

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