

Pathways for the International Communication of Yellow River Ecological Culture*

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Amid the national strategy for Yellow River ecological protection, Shandong's estuary wetland—a World Heritage migratory bird habitat—holds unique value for international communication. Yet current practices face translation, narrative, and channel dilemmas. This study constructs a “coexistence-empathy” framework integrating eco-translatology and cross-cultural theory, proposing a two-wheel strategy: value coexistence through “green translation” of terminology and localized human stories, and emotional empathy through immersive communication, agenda resonance, and targeted audience strategies. Transforming ecological value into communicative value positions the Yellow River as a bridge for civilization dialogue.

Keywords: Yellow River ecological culture, international communication, eco-translatology, cross-cultural communication, Shandong

Introduction

The ecological protection and high-quality development of the Yellow River basin have become a major national strategy with profound implications for both China's sustainable development and global environmental governance. Ecological culture serves as the “greatest common divisor” in international communication precisely because it transcends civilization and speaks to shared human concerns (Zhang, 2023). As climate change, biodiversity loss, and sustainable development become increasingly urgent global challenges, the ecological wisdom embodied in river basin management offers unique opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue.

Within this landscape, Shandong occupies an irreplaceable position. As the Yellow River's estuary, Shandong boasts the most complete, youngest, and most typical coastal wetland ecosystem in the world's warm temperate zones. The Yellow River Estuary Wetland spans over 150,000 hectares and serves as a critical stopover, wintering, and breeding site for millions of migratory birds along the East Asian-Australasian Flyway. In July 2024, the Yellow River Estuary Migratory Bird Habitat was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List as part of the Migratory Bird Sanctuaries along the Coast of the Yellow Sea-Bohai Gulf of China—the first natural World Heritage site in Shandong and a testament to its global ecological significance. The question,

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then, is how localized practices of Shandong can be effectively translated and communicated to achieve genuine cross-cultural understanding. This study addresses two core questions: First, how can Shandong's localized ecological practices be transformed into globally resonant communication content? Second, how can translation and media strategies bridge cultural gaps, shifting the paradigm from one-way "propaganda" to genuine cross-cultural "dialogue"?

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Existing scholarship on the international communication of Yellow River culture has developed along three interconnected trajectories. Research on discourse system construction (Jiao, 2024; Yin & Cao, 2024) emphasizes the importance of systematic approaches to enhancing cultural influence, focusing on how to frame Yellow River narratives within broader Chinese cultural discourse. However, these studies tend toward grand historical and civilizational narratives, with insufficient attention to the specific dimension of "ecological culture" and its unique potential for cross-cultural resonance.

Translation studies have made significant contributions through the introduction of eco-translatology. Huang and Hu (2024) propose the concept of "green translation" for new media Yellow River stories, emphasizing the need for adaptive selection across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Wang (2024) further explores translation strategies for ecological culture in the Yellow River basin, highlighting the importance of considering the translational eco-environment. Yet these studies largely remain at the technical level of language conversion, seldom integrating audience psychology or media channel considerations into their analytical frameworks.

Media and communication research has explored the potential of media convergence and information visualization. Scholars such as Shen (2022), Hu and Qiu (2024), and Tian (2022) examine how visual communication can enhance the international reach of Yellow River culture. However, these studies tend to focus on technological and formal aspects of communication, neglecting the crucial question of how to craft emotionally engaging narratives specifically for ecological themes.

Building on these foundations while addressing their limitations, this study constructs a "coexistence-empathy" analytical framework integrating three complementary theoretical resources. Eco-translatology (Huang & Hu, 2024; Wang, 2024) provides tools for analyzing and guiding the translation of ecological content, emphasizing adaptive choices that balance fidelity to local meaning with accessibility for international audiences across linguistic, cultural, and communicative dimensions. Cross-cultural audience theory addresses the challenge of "cultural discount"—the loss of value that cultural products suffer when transported across cultural boundaries (Yu, 2020; Xu & Li, 2019; Xin & Ye, 2020). Multimodal discourse analysis (Xiao, 2017) provides methodological tools for understanding how meaning is constructed in new media environments through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes—image, sound, text, movement.

Status Quo and Dilemmas in International Communication

Status Quo

Shandong has developed increasingly diverse content for international communication of its Yellow River ecological culture. Shandong Radio and Television Station, in collaboration with Five Continents Communication and National Geographic, produced *The Land of the Great River* (Season 2), which premiered

globally on National Geographic's Splendid China program in 2025. The first season of this documentary series has been broadcast through channels including CGTN. Academic and institutional contributions have strengthened the knowledge base. The Shandong Academy of Social Sciences has been advancing research projects on Yellow River culture, including a collaborative research initiative launched in April 2025 with social science academies from nine Yellow River provinces and regions. The Shandong Provincial Water Resources Department has advanced a comprehensive water culture initiative, establishing a database of over 2,000 water conservancy heritage sites and promoting publications such as *The Yellow River Enters the Sea Here*. In terms of channel construction, the Shandong International Communication Center has established presences on major overseas social platforms including YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. High-profile events have created new platforms for international engagement. Dongying City has pursued innovative outreach to Korean audiences, conducting urban image video exhibitions in over 20 South Korean universities targeting "Generation Z" and organizing 10 "Enjoy China Festival" folk culture exchange activities during the 2026 Spring Festival in cities including Chuncheon, Seoul, and Incheon.

Core Dilemmas

Despite these initiatives, Shandong's international communication of Yellow River ecological culture faces three interconnected dilemmas requiring systematic attention.

Translation dilemma: The challenge of symbolic conversion:

Technical terminology and concepts carrying distinctively Chinese institutional and philosophical meanings resist straightforward translation. Terms "wetland restoration" and "carbon neutrality" have internationally accepted translations but, when embedded in Chinese policy contexts, carry unique connotations regarding state-society relations, development priorities, and temporal horizons that are lost in simple linguistic transfer. The challenge is not finding equivalent words but conveying the conceptual frameworks within which these terms operate (Huang & Hu, 2024; Wang, 2024).

Narrative dilemma: Outdated storytelling paradigms:

Current communication exhibits three characteristic limitations. First, it emphasizes results over process: International audiences see statistics about wetland area restored or bird species recovered but learn little about the struggles, innovations, and human efforts behind these achievements. Second, it privileges grand landscapes over human details: Aerial cinematography captures the majesty of the Yellow River Estuary but rarely focuses on the individuals whose daily work makes its protection possible. Third, it prioritizes self-presentation over audience resonance: Content answers "what do we want to say?" rather than "what would international audiences want to know?" Consequently, it lacks meaningful connection with globally shared concerns such as climate action and biodiversity conservation, reflecting what Xu and Li (2019) term the "emotional boundaries" that separate cultural groups when communication remains at the cognitive level.

Channel dilemma: Superficial audience reach:

Despite establishing presences on major platforms, Shandong's international social media operations suffer from limited influence and low engagement rates. Communication remains predominantly one-way "broadcast" rather than interactive dialogue, with minimal audience participation or user-generated content. Integration with international travel and media platforms remains underdeveloped, and inbound tourism infrastructure—payment systems, multilingual services, international connectivity—requires significant enhancement to support the experiential communication that ultimately proves most powerful.

International Communication Strategies: The Two-Wheel Drive of Coexistence and Empathy

To address these interconnected dilemmas, this study proposes a “coexistence-empathy” framework consisting of two mutually reinforcing strategic wheels. The coexistence wheel ensures that Shandong’s ecological content is accurately and meaningfully translated across cultural boundaries, revealing its global significance while maintaining fidelity to local reality. The empathy wheel ensures that this content connects emotionally with diverse international audiences through innovative narrative and media strategies. These two wheels operate in synergy: Coexistence provides the substantive foundation for communication, while empathy supplies the affective force that transforms information into resonance.

Value Coexistence: Constructing Precise External Discourse

Value coexistence requires articulating Shandong’s ecological practices in ways that reveal their participation in global ecological systems while remaining faithful to local specificity. This involves two complementary strategies.

Strategy 1: “Green Translation” of terminology:

Drawing on eco-translatology’s principle of adaptive selection within the translational eco-environment (Huang & Hu, 2024), this strategy moves beyond literal substitution toward strategic reframing that reveals the universal significance embedded in local concepts. For instance, translating “黄河口” (Yellow River Estuary) not merely as a geographical name but as “a critical hub for global migratory bird routes” immediately positions local conservation efforts within the East Asian-Australasian Flyway—a network spanning 22 countries that depends on the estuary as a resting and feeding site for millions of birds. This reframing transforms a place name into a statement of global ecological interdependence, making clear why international audiences should care about its protection.

Similarly, the poetic Chinese phrase “蓝黄交汇” (blue-yellow convergence) describes the visual phenomenon where the muddy Yellow River meets the clear Bohai Sea. Rather than offering a geological explanation of sediment loads and current dynamics, the translation “where the Yellow River meets the blue sea—a spectacle of nature in motion” prioritizes visual imagery and emotional appeal. This approach invites wonder rather than demanding specialized knowledge, allowing the phenomenon’s aesthetic power to transcend language barriers while subtly conveying the dynamic ecological processes at work.

A third example involves technical terminology. “盐碱地治理” (saline-alkali land management) might conventionally be translated as a description of a remediation technique. However, framing it as “transforming marginal land into productive ecosystems” shifts focus from technical challenge to innovative achievement. This reframing connects Shandong’s experience with global conversations about ecological restoration and sustainable development, presenting local practices as contributions to shared challenges rather than merely local curiosities. The principle across these examples is consistent: “Green translation” identifies the global significance latent in local phenomena and makes it explicit through strategic linguistic choices.

Strategy 2: “Localized” expression of human stories:

While terminology addresses the “what” of ecological communication, human stories address the “who” and “why,” accessing what Xu and Li (2019) term “emotional boundaries” that rational appeals often fail to cross. The rangers of the Yellow River Delta Nature Reserve embody the daily reality of ecological protection. Their observations of returning bird species, their interventions to protect nesting sites from disturbance, their patient

dedication across changing seasons—these narratives transform abstract conservation goals into tangible human commitment. International audiences may not know the scientific details of wetland restoration, but they understand dedication, patience, and the joy of witnessing life’s return. These localized stories operate on the principle of “the universal in the particular”: Through the specificity of individual experience, they access emotions and values shared across cultures—hope, pride, connection to place, concern for future generations.

Emotional Empathy: Innovating Cross-Cultural Narratives Through Media

Where value coexistence ensures content is translatable, emotional empathy ensures it is felt. This requires moving beyond traditional information transmission to create experiences that engage audiences affectively through three interconnected strategies.

Strategy 3: Visual priority and immersive communication:

Multimodal discourse analysis demonstrates that meaning in new media environments is constructed through the interaction of multiple semiotic modes—image, sound, text, movement (Xiao, 2017). Visual and immersive approaches reduce dependence on language, making content more accessible across linguistic boundaries while generating emotional responses that factual information alone cannot achieve.

Virtual reality experiences, allowing international users to “fly” over the Yellow River Delta, communicate the ecosystem’s scale and beauty more powerfully than any textual description. The emotional response to such immersion creates attachment and investment in the place’s protection. Twenty-four-hour slow live streams from key locations—a bird colony during breeding season, the river mouth at sunset—offer another form of immersive connection. Unlike edited documentaries, slow streams provide unmediated, continuous access. International viewers can check “their” spot at any time, watching seasonal transformations and the rhythms of wildlife, building virtual presence and emotional investment over time. Information visualization transforms ecological monitoring data—bird population trends, wetland area changes, water quality improvements—into compelling visual narratives, making scientific achievements emotionally accessible (Tian, 2022).

Strategy 4: Agenda resonance with global frameworks:

Yu’s (2020) concept of “meaning nodes” highlights the importance of framing local content within globally recognized interpretive frameworks. World Wetlands Day (February 2) provides an annual platform to showcase the delta’s international significance, with content released on this date entering a global conversation and reaching audiences already interested in wetland conservation. World Migratory Bird Day (May and October) offers opportunities to highlight the delta’s role in the East Asian-Australasian Flyway, connecting local conservation to a hemispheric network.

Beyond calendar alignment, agenda resonance involves framing local practices as contributions to global conversations. The delta’s role in carbon sequestration speaks to climate action discourse; its biodiversity recovery addresses Convention on Biological Diversity targets; its sustainable development model contributes to UN Sustainable Development Goals. When local stories are told within these frameworks, they become relevant to international audiences already engaged with these issues.

Strategy 5: Targeted communication for diverse audiences:

Cross-cultural audience theory recognizes that different audiences bring different cultural backgrounds, value orientations, and information habits to their reception of international content. For Euro-American audiences, where environmental discourse is often framed in scientific and policy terms, content should emphasize biodiversity data, climate implications, and conservation outcomes—the delta’s flyway role, carbon

sequestration capacity, World Heritage status. Partnerships with international conservation organizations such as WWF or Bird Life International can enhance credibility and reach. For Japanese and Korean audiences, cultural proximity offers additional pathways. Shared East Asian philosophical traditions—Confucian emphasis on harmony, Buddhist respect for life, Daoist appreciation of nature—provide resonances that can be evoked through aesthetic presentation. For audiences in the Global South, where development and conservation must be balanced, Shandong’s experience in coordinating ecological protection with livelihood improvement offers practical relevance.

Conclusion

Shandong’s Yellow River ecological culture possesses unique assets for international communication. Realizing this potential requires systematically addressing the translation, narrative, and channel dilemmas that currently limit communicative effectiveness. The “coexistence-empathy” framework offers a comprehensive approach to transforming ecological value into communicative value. Value coexistence operates through “green translation” that reveals global significance in local phenomena and human stories that access universal emotions. Emotional empathy operates through immersive communication that reduces language barriers, agenda resonance that aligns local content with global frameworks, and targeted strategies that respond to audience diversity. These two wheels work synergistically: Green translation creates cross-culturally resonant content, human stories provide emotional entry points, immersive technologies deliver affective impact, agenda resonance ensures contextual relevance, and targeted communication adapts to specific audiences. Ultimately, this approach moves beyond one-way transmission toward genuine dialogue. The Yellow River becomes not just China’s story, but a bridge connecting cultures through the universal language of ecological care.

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