

Framing Ethnic Minority Representation in Chinese Media: A Comparative Analysis of People's Daily and Hunan Daily in the Context of Targeted Poverty Alleviation

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Abstract

This paper examines how ethnic minority identities were produced in news reports of the Targeted Poverty Alleviation campaign in China between 2015 and 2020 by examining how the Party organ, People's Daily, and the provincial newspaper, Hunan Daily, reported the same issue. Using a corpus of 230 articles (120 national, 110 provincial) available through digital archives (using governance and ethnicity-related search terms), it employs qualitative comparison as the main method of the research, basing it on framing theory, Faircloughian critical discourse approaches, and the theory of representation. The analysis coded texts on evaluative lexis, agency assignment, and voice attribution as well as cultural imagery. Results indicate that people's readings are biased towards macro achievement discourses, Party elite, and passive grammar that present communities as benefactors whose sense of gratitude is a political reward. Hunan Daily, on its part, uses human-centered narration, quotations, and action verbs to predict local decision-making, entrepreneurship, and cultural economy. The comparison shows no institutional scale in representation of the authority of the institution because the central discourse produces symbolic inclusion with a poor voice, whereas provincial discourse can partially represent the self and have more subjectivity. The study explicates how poverty governance communication produces an imagination of agency and provides implications for increased voice-based reporting on rebuilding post-poverty revitalization.

Keywords: Faircloughian CDA, narrative agency, voice attribution, cultural economy, central–provincial press hierarchy

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Since the implementation of China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) initiative in 2015, ethnic minority regions have occupied the centre of national development discourse. These regions, characterised by cultural diversity, historical marginalisation, and geographic inaccessibility, were positioned as crucial sites requiring intervention and resource allocation (Chen, 2026). By 2020, China officially declared the elimination of extreme rural poverty, a milestone broadly framed by mainstream media as not only an economic achievement but a civilisational success that strengthened national cohesion and global legitimacy (Tang, 2024). Throughout this period, the media did not merely document rural transformation; it actively produced the narratives through which the public understood ethnic minorities, their livelihoods, and their relationship to state modernisation (Saunders, 2021). People's Daily, as the national ideological organ, has been instrumental in constructing narratives of policy success, unity, and progress. In contrast, Hunan Daily, as a provincial-level newspaper grounded within minority-populated regions, possesses greater proximity to local communities, cultural expression, and micro-level development experiences (Jia, 2023). It is this divergence in representational vantage that motivates this research.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although prior scholarship acknowledges the strong media role in shaping minority perception under poverty governance, little research has examined how ethnic groups are linguistically framed differently in central versus regional newspapers (Shahzad et al., 2025). A dominant question persists: do national newspapers portray minorities as symbolic beneficiaries of state-led revitalisation, while local newspapers portray them as active contributors and cultural agents? Existing studies

recognise that minorities are often positioned through celebratory and harmonious imagery, yet these works rarely explore how media scale influences representational tone, narrative ownership, or linguistic agency (Zhao et al., 2025). Without comparative discourse analysis, assumptions about media portrayal remain generalised and incomplete. The gap lies not in whether minorities are represented, but how they are spoken about, and whether their voices emerge as narrative subjects or remain mediated through external narrators such as officials, cadres, and state actors. This study addresses that gap by contrasting People's Daily and Hunan Daily during the five-year TPA campaign (Li, 2025).

1.3 Research Significance

The significance of this research lies in demonstrating that representation is not a neutral textual description, but a political act of identity construction. The way media narrate poverty intervention determines whether minority groups are viewed as capable agents or passive recipients of benevolence. Understanding these portrayals strengthens theoretical insight into the intersection between state communication, development governance, and cultural discourse. The comparative design not only expands academic understanding of how central and local media diverge in representational framing but also offers practical relevance for journalistic practice in post-poverty revitalisation. As China transitions from alleviation to rural renewal, narrative space must shift from celebration to reflection, from symbolic display to voice-centred participation. This research contributes to that transition by illustrating both the power and limits of existing discourse (Hutagalung, 2024).

1.4 Research Objectives and Questions

The objective of this study is to analyse how ethnic minorities were discursively framed across two hierarchical news outlets during the TPA period. Specifically, it seeks to uncover the linguistic strategies through which identity, agency, and belonging were constructed. Therefore, the study asks: How are ethnic minorities framed in People's Daily and Hunan Daily during TPA? What representational differences emerge between national ideology-driven narratives and provincial culturally grounded narratives? How do these framings influence the public imagination of minority subjectivity and agency? By addressing these questions, this research positions itself as a structural investigation into media-produced identity under China's poverty governance system.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Media Framing Theory

Media framing theory offers a critical interpretive lens for understanding how news discourse constructs representations of social groups, events, and political interventions. Rather than existing as passive reflections of reality, frames selectively highlight certain aspects of information while marginalising others, thereby influencing how audiences interpret meaning (Entman, 1993). In the context of China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation campaign, framing plays a central role in shaping the public imagination of minority poverty, progress, and national unity. Studies show that official media frequently emphasised the narrative of national achievement, foregrounding keywords such as victory, happiness, unity, completion, and prosperity to naturalise developmental success (Carragee, 2019). This reporting style encourages readers to interpret poverty alleviation as a moral and political triumph rather than a complex socioeconomic restructuring process (Tang, 2024).

More recent scholarship demonstrates that framing in Chinese media is closely aligned with ideological goals. Through narrative repetition, lexical emphasis, and omission of complexity, media narratives guide public perception toward an interpretation favourable to state legitimacy (Li, 2024). In this study, framing is used to analyse whether People's Daily amplifies top-down policy achievements while Hunan Daily foregrounds local creativity and cultural agency. The power of framing lies not only in what is said but also in what remains unsaid: the absence of critical reflection or diverse minority voices becomes a discursive structure that silently reinforces unequal visibility. Therefore, framing theory supports this research by revealing how meaning is manufactured through repetition, tone, narrative sequencing, and authority attribution within media texts.

2.2 Representation and Identity Construction

Representation theory extends the analysis beyond surface description by asserting that identity is not discovered but produced through discourse. Hall (1997) conceptualises representation as a system through which language assigns meaning, constructs categories, and positions social subjects within ideological boundaries. Ethnic minorities, therefore, do not merely appear in media; they are discursively authored, shaped by the words, metaphors, and visual cues chosen by journalists and editors. In China, media representation often oscillates between romanticised cultural celebration and developmental gratitude, presenting minority groups either as colourful keepers of heritage or as loyal beneficiaries of state guidance (Zhao et al., 2025).

Research since 2015 consistently reports that minorities in mainstream media are more often spoken about than spoken with, suggesting an asymmetry of narrative voice and representation authority (Gillespie, 2024; Jariah, 2025). While such

portrayals appear positive and unifying, they risk flattening internal diversity and masking structural inequalities that persist beneath symbolic imagery. Representation thus becomes an ideological act—one capable of reinforcing paternalistic interpretations of development if minorities lack ownership of their own narratives. This study applies representation theory to evaluate how minority identity is constructed differently in *People's Daily* and *Hunan Daily*, and whether provincial proximity results in greater narrative agency for minority voices (Yu et al., 2024).

2.3 *Studies on Ethnic Minority Representation in Chinese News*

A growing body of scholarship examines how minority groups are portrayed in Chinese media, identifying recurring representational tropes across political, cultural, and economic reporting. Recent discourse studies highlight three dominant archetypes: the harmonious minority, the cultural-spectacle minority, and the model-minority protagonist (Hagstrom & Nordin, 2019; Huang, 2014). The harmonious minority is depicted as peaceful, loyal, and grateful, symbolising national unity and political stability. The cultural-spectacle minority is represented visually through traditional dress, dance, music, and festivals, reinforcing cultural richness but often without narrative depth. The model-minority archetype frames individuals as hardworking, patriotic, and self-reliant, aligning with state narratives that valorise economic productivity and modern citizenship.

While these studies advance understanding of symbolic minority representation, most treat media as monolithic and seldom compare central–provincial discourse dynamics. Little is known about how local proximity influences narrative tone, detail richness, or agency distribution. The gap lies not only in representation content but in representational power structures: Who narrates minorities? Who speaks on their behalf? And how does scale determine authority? This research addresses this deficiency through a two-level comparative approach that evaluates representation from both ideological (central) and experiential (provincial) vantage points.

2.4 *Discourse Studies on Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA)*

Targeted Poverty Alleviation discourse has been a key focus of Chinese communication research since 2015, particularly after the national achievement was declared in 2020. Scholars note that media language during this era was characterised by strong positivity, high-frequency repetition of success terms, and moral reinforcement of Party leadership (Li, 2024). Discourse analysis reveals that TPA reporting frequently frames poverty elimination as a collective victory rather than a contested development process (Tang, 2024). Words such as transformation, breakthrough, prosperity, and revitalisation appeared as anchors of achievement-oriented storytelling, contributing to a celebratory narrative that overshadowed complexities such as labour migration, cultural tension, or uneven development outcomes (Li et al., 2024).

Research identifies that gratitude framing was particularly prominent in reports describing ethnic minority villages, with communities represented as thankful recipients of government intervention rather than as active agents of economic transformation (Feng & Li, 2020). However, emerging provincial literature shows evidence of alternative discourse patterns. Some regional outlets, including *Hunan Daily*, have been observed foregrounding community-driven innovation, documenting local tea industries, artisan cooperatives, and heritage-based tourism initiatives through named individual testimonies (Jia, 2023). These findings indicate the possibility of a contrasting participatory framing structure—one that deserves empirical comparative evaluation.

2.5 *Central–Local Media System and Structural Discourse Roles*

China's media operates within a tiered communication hierarchy in which national and provincial newspapers fulfil distinct ideological functions. *People's Daily* communicates official state interpretation, stabilises narrative consensus and reinforces national cohesion, making its discourse macro-scaled, future-oriented and achievement-focused (Triggs, 2019). In contrast, *Hunan Daily* functions within a more community-embedded ecology that allows closer contact with minority populations, enabling ethnographic detail, personalised storytelling, and cultural-situated representation to emerge (Peng, 2022). Yet even provincial discourse is not politically detached; it remains influenced by central guidance, meaning local empowerment does not necessarily equate to full narrative autonomy.

The significance of comparing these two outlets lies in evaluating whether representation shifts meaningfully with proximity. If central reporting constructs minorities as symbolic beneficiaries of developmental modernity, while provincial reporting foregrounds lived agency and cultural ownership, the study may reveal representational asymmetry that shapes national consciousness. This structural duality is therefore central to theoretical development within ethnic media studies.

2.6 *Summary and Gap Identification*

The literature clearly demonstrates that media framing and representation shape how ethnic minorities are imagined within national discourse and that TPA reporting emphasised success, unity, and gratitude as dominant themes. However, it also shows that local-level reporting may offer more textured depictions rooted in daily life, cultural specificity, and personal narrative. Despite this, a systematic comparative study that evaluates linguistic framing across central and provincial news

levels during TPA remains absent. The field lacks research that interrogates how identity is constructed differently depending on narrative scale, discursive authority, and proximity to lived minority experience. The present study fills this gap by offering a central–provincial comparative Critical Discourse Analysis, advancing not only documentary understanding of representation but its structural implications for cultural belonging, agency, and memory.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Framing Theory

Framing Theory forms the analytical backbone of this research, as it clarifies how meaning is deliberately constructed through selective emphasis. Rather than functioning as a neutral medium, the press highlights particular narrative threads, assigns causality, and shapes public interpretation through lexical repetition, sentence sequencing, and moral positioning (Entman, 1993). In the context of Targeted Poverty Alleviation discourse, framing helped transform policy implementation into a national success symbol. Studies have shown that keywords such as victory, breakthrough, prosperity, unity, and gratitude frequently dominated media narratives, encouraging audiences to internalise poverty eradication as a collective triumph achieved through political determination and coherent national will. The mechanism of framing constructs not only perception but emotional response, persuading readers that poverty alleviation was an inevitable and celebrated endpoint rather than a complex social negotiation embedded in uneven histories (Hutagalung, 2024).

Framing is particularly important for this study because it allows us to compare whether People's Daily and Hunan Daily adopt similar or divergent representational strategies when describing ethnic minority participation in the TPA campaign. If the national press consistently frames minorities as recipients of support, reliant on Party-led intervention, and positioned as proof of national development, then representation may indicate dependency framing. Conversely, if provincial reporting foregrounds personal experience, local resilience, and community-led innovation, then agency framing may emerge instead (Jia, 2023). The theoretical value of framing lies in its ability to reveal how nuance is shaped, filtered, or removed in media text. What is highlighted becomes naturalised; what is omitted becomes invisible. Understanding framing is therefore essential to uncover the interpretive power that media hold when narrating minority identity within poverty discourse.

3.2 Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995)

While framing explains the selection of meaning, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides the methodology for interpreting how meaning is embedded within power relations. Fairclough (2015) conceptualises discourse not only as language but as a social practice through which ideology is circulated and authority is legitimised. His three-dimensional model — text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice — allows language to be examined at structural, institutional, and ideological levels simultaneously. The textual dimension involves examining vocabulary, modality, pronoun use, voice attribution, and evaluative adjectives to determine whether minorities appear as active subjects or described objects. The discursive practice dimension focuses on voice: who speaks, who is quoted, and who narrates whom. If villagers seldom speak directly and officials narrate their development on their behalf, discursive power remains externally located (Yue, 2022). The sociocultural dimension situates representation within broader ideological structures, such as national unity, socialist modernity, and state-led governance.

CDA is particularly well-suited for this study because Targeted Poverty Alleviation was not only an administrative programme but also a political narrative that required mass communication to generate public legitimacy. People's Daily, operating at the core of state ideological communication, has the power to amplify official interpretation, stabilise consensus, and diminish discursive plurality (Li, 2024). Hunan Daily, by contrast, is positioned within lived cultural geographies and often features first-person testimony, local knowledge, and experiential narrative that central media rarely foreground. CDA enables us to interpret these differences not merely as stylistic variation but as indicators of authority distribution. Whose voice narrates poverty intervention becomes a measure of representational power, and whether minorities speak or are spoken for reveals who holds ownership of history.

3.3 Representation & Identity Theory

Representation Theory provides the final conceptual pillar of this research, grounding the analysis in an understanding that identity is not inherent but discursively constructed. Hall (1997) argues that representation is a meaning-making practice through which social groups are defined, labelled, and positioned. In media discourse, minority identity is created through language — not discovered. Words such as poor, grateful, hardworking, traditional, or backward do more than describe; they constitute identity by signalling value and expectation. Media representation, therefore, determines whether minorities appear capable or dependent, modern or folkloric, innovative or static (Zhao et al., 2025). Studies from the past decade show that positive imagery, such as colourful dress, folk dance, and scenic landscape, often dominate media representation of ethnic groups, yet such celebration can obscure the socioeconomic struggle that makes cultural survival

difficult. When minority voices do not narrate their own development, identity becomes a projection rather than an expression.

This research applies Representation Theory to analyse how People's Daily and Hunan Daily discursively construct minority identity differently through tone, agency attribution, cultural emphasis, and communicative proximity. The national press may produce symbolic minorities who exist as evidence of state transformation, while provincial press may produce human minorities who exist as participants in their own revitalisation. Identity is thus not fixed but positional, shifting according to narrative authority. Representation Theory ensures that the study does not merely identify language variation but interprets what such variation means for belonging, self-recognition, and cultural authority.

3.4 Integrated Conceptual Model

Together, Framing Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Representation Theory form the integrated conceptual model guiding this research. Targeted Poverty Alleviation is the macro-policy context that produced extensive national media discourse. Newspapers transform policy into narrative text. Framing determines which meanings become dominant within that text, while CDA reveals how those meanings reflect hierarchical power and ideological circulation. Representation Theory then interprets how discursive portrayals shape minority identity, either empowering agency or reinforcing dependency. The integration of these frameworks allows the research to move beyond content description toward structural analysis, explaining not only what words appear but why they appear, who benefits from their appearance, and how identity is influenced through narrative construction.

In this conceptual model, minority identity is understood not as a pre-existing social category but as the discursive product of media narration. When People's Daily consistently foregrounds national triumph, minorities become symbolic citizens embedded within an achievement narrative. When Hunan Daily foregrounds personal struggle, cultural labour, and entrepreneurial initiative, minorities become active subjects of their own transformation. This theoretical synergy allows the study to interpret media representation as a locus of ideological negotiation through which national belonging is defined.

4. Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative comparative discourse analysis because ethnic representation cannot be meaningfully measured through frequency alone; instead, it must be interpreted through language, tone, narrative structure, and ideological positioning. Qualitative comparison allows the research to examine how media scale influences representation by placing People's Daily and Hunan Daily in direct analytical dialogue. The objective is not merely to count terms but to reveal the cultural intentions embedded within them. This approach is rooted in the understanding that discourse constructs rather than reflects reality, and that representation becomes visible through patterns of voice distribution, sentence modality, agency assignment, and lexical cueing. A qualitative lens, therefore, enables a deeper interpretive understanding of how identity is framed and how different media institutions allocate narrative authority to minority subjects.

4.2 Data Corpus and Sampling

News articles were sourced from digital archives of People's Daily (central level) and Hunan Daily (provincial level), covering the full implementation window of Targeted Poverty Alleviation (2015–2020). Keywords associated with minority ethnicity, TPA achievements, rural revitalisation, and poverty transformation were used to retrieve texts. A total of 230 articles were selected for analysis, consisting of 120 from the national outlet and 110 from the provincial outlet. Texts were included only if they referenced ethnic populations directly rather than discussing poverty governance abstractly. This ensured that identity representation remained central rather than peripheral to the evaluated discourse.

Notably, the unit of analysis in this paper is the news discourse where ethnic minority identity is created throughout the Targeted Poverty Alleviation, and not the lived experience of a single ethnic group. Since its operation as the provincial comparator, Hunan Daily is geographically located in its coverage of minority regions in Hunan and, as such, is most often found to cover Miao, Tujia, Dong, and Yao communities, and more general coverage related to minority villages, households, and cultural industries. The research was structured in a manner that would help to capture the prevailing minority related TPA reporting in the two archives in the 2015-2020 period. It does not purport demographic representativeness in all ethnic minorities in China. It is aimed at defining recurrent representational logics in a distinctly discrete field of the media.

Articles were only retained to enhance the transparency of sampling where three criteria were satisfied. To start with, the report was required to be within the 2015 to 2020 TPA period. Second, it had to relate poverty alleviation, rural transformation, or revitalisation with an identified minority community, minority village, minority household, or ethnic cultural practice. Third, the ethnic reference needed to be substantively elaborated in the narrative, but not mentioned

across. Reporting that was based on abstract policy goals, macro indicators, or generic rural governance, and did not identify the minorities that were excluded. Through this process, ethnicity was kept as a major category of representation in the corpus.

To visually document the dataset, the following table summarises publication type, source level, and corpus size:

Table 1. News Corpus for Comparative Analysis

Newspaper Source	Media Level	Number of Articles	Publication Period
Peoples Daily	National (Central Press)	120	2015-2020
Hunan Daily	Provincial (Local Press)	110	2015-2020

The distribution reveals a balanced sample that supports cross-level comparison. People's Daily provides a macro-narrative window into central ideology, whereas Hunan Daily represents community-proximal discourse, allowing for meaningful evaluation of representational divergence.

4.3 Analytical Procedure and Coding

Analysis followed a four-stage interpretive process aligned with Faircloughian Critical Discourse Analysis. The first stage involved complete reading and immersion in all texts to establish familiarity with narrative tone, identity vocabulary, and structural coherence. The second stage involved linguistic annotation, where texts were marked for lexical patterns such as evaluative adjectives, agency verbs, metaphors, and cultural imagery. The third stage organised coded excerpts into recurring thematic frames, enabling comparison across media levels. The final stage cross-examined emergent patterns to evaluate whether representation of minority groups shifted depending on institutional scale and communicative function.

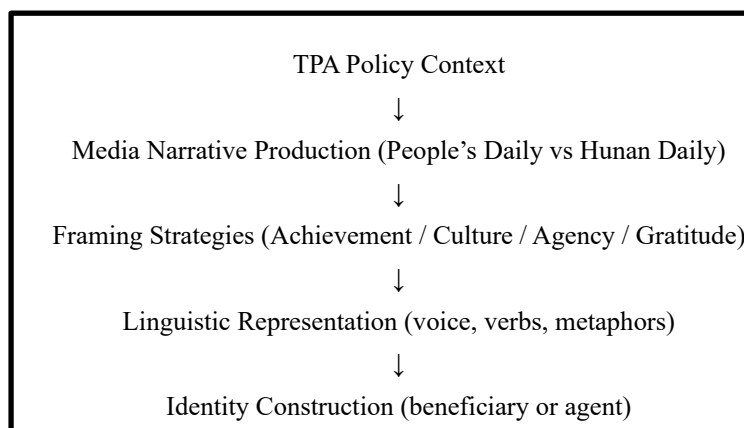


Figure 1. Conceptual Flow of Representation Analysis

This figure demonstrates how representation forms through staged textual movement rather than spontaneously. Policy gives narrative motive; media converts motive into discourse; framing filters discourse into meaning; representation constructs identity from meaning.

4.4 Reliability, Validation, and Researcher Reflexivity

Because qualitative interpretation involves subjective judgement, reliability and reflexivity were built into the analysis. Coding was repeated multiple times over non-consecutive days to verify consistency across interpretation. Extracted narrative segments were cross-checked with published research to confirm thematic alignment, particularly in relation to central–local representational dynamics.

Reflexive journaling was maintained throughout coding to monitor analytic bias. Recognising that researchers may sympathise more with culturally grounded narratives than central political narratives, reflexivity was used to balance evaluation through conscious attention to neutrality. This ensured that findings emerged from textual evidence rather than the researcher's expectation. Final interpretation focused exclusively on discursive features observable within the corpus, making the representation outcome traceable, justified, and academically defensible.

It is the findings that should be interpreted as analytically transferable, but not statistically generalisable. Qualitative discourse analysis is not aimed at modelling the allocation of all minority reporting in China. Rather, it looks at the functioning of representation in a constrained corpus determined by outlet hierarchy, policy period, and geographical proximity. This weakness is spelled out explicitly to ensure that the study claims are in proportion with the design.

5. Findings

5.1 Representation in People's Daily: National Achievement and Policy Centrality

Analysis of People's Daily revealed a dominant emphasis on policy accomplishment, state leadership, and collective national progress. Textual patterns demonstrated that poverty alleviation was seldom positioned as a gradual, negotiated process, but instead narrated as an inevitable outcome of Party-directed governance. Verbs associated with transformation were frequently instrumental rather than collaborative, suggesting that villages "advanced," "leapt forward," or "achieved historic breakthroughs," implying top-down momentum rather than community-led evolution. Passive constructions further reinforced this configuration. Phrases such as "minority families were lifted out of poverty" and "villages were revitalised under state guidance" appeared repeatedly, emphasising action upon subjects rather than action by subjects.

The tone of reporting was markedly monumental. Articles presented poverty alleviation as a milestone in Chinese modernisation, often contrasting past scarcity with present abundance using metaphorical constructions. Typical lexicon included decisive victory, national rejuvenation, prosperity achieved, and historic conclusion, framing TPA as a terminal achievement rather than an ongoing development stage. In many cases, minorities functioned rhetorically as evidence of governmental triumph — communities were described as "grateful," "inspired," or "finally integrated into prosperity barriers," positioning emotional affirmation as a form of political validation.

Direct quotations in People's Daily tended to come from officials, cadres, policy leaders, and expert commentators rather than villagers themselves. Where minority voice was present, it was usually brief, symbolic, and heavily structured — often reiterating gratitude or praising government support. The discursive result was an identity structure where minorities appeared as recipients of development, beneficiaries of aid, and living proof of national unity. Agency, when present, was collective, not personal; communities "responded," "embraced," "followed," or "aligned with change" rather than initiated it.

Overall, the national discourse produced a representational image of ethnic minorities as loyal participants in a state-led poverty transformation. Their value was signified by their inclusion in the national success narrative rather than by the articulation of their own aspirations or cultural innovation. Such framing reflects what representation theorists call a symbolic inclusion model, where identity is present but voice is limited.

5.2 Representation in Hunan Daily: Human-Centred and Cultural-Embedded Transformation

In contrast, Hunan Daily employed a far more intimate narrative tone. Articles contained specific names, household histories, dialect features, and cultural descriptions that grounded transformation within lived experience rather than state abstraction. Villagers appeared as identifiable subjects: farmers who adopted hybrid rice, artisans who revived batik work, and youth who returned to mountain villages to develop cooperative tea farming. These personal portrayals were rarely present in People's Daily, indicating a representational shift from symbolic communities to singular narrative voices.

Agency verbs were frequent. Rather than being "lifted" from poverty, communities in Hunan Daily "decided," organised," "built," and "led." Texts referenced initiative — villagers negotiated market access, developed online sales platforms, introduced crop diversification, and revitalised ethnic crafts as entrepreneurial livelihoods. These portrayals produced a subject-position where minorities appeared capable, strategic, and resilient. While government assistance was acknowledged, it was regularly described as a partnership rather than control, indicating a bidirectional developmental relationship in which communities retained decision-making power.

Cultural representation was also more textured. Instead of decorative festival imagery alone, cultural practice was frequently linked to livelihood. Miao embroidery was described as income generation, not simply heritage. Tujia bronze-drum ceremonies were positioned as tourist attractions that created employment. Dong polyphonic singing was reported as both an identity and an industry. Culture, therefore, emerged not as a symbol but as an economic resource — a shift that deepened minority subjectivity by acknowledging skill, creativity, and labour.

Direct quotations were abundant and conversational rather than ceremonial. Villagers expressed frustration, ambition, pride, and fatigue, presenting development as emotionally layered rather than uniformly triumphant. Where People's Daily narrated the transformation, Hunan Daily allowed subjects to speak about the transformation. This subtle but critical difference demonstrates how narrative proximity shapes representation. When voice is localised, identity expands beyond symbolic gratitude into human complexity.

5.3 Symbolic Imagery vs. Cultural Economy — Comparative Representation

A cross-outlet comparison indicates divergence not only in tone but in representational purpose. In People's Daily, minority culture appeared as spectacle — silver headdresses, drum dances, fire-torches, and festival colour — often unaccompanied by socioeconomic context. Cultural identity acted as a visual indicator of national diversity and heritage protection. In Hunan Daily, cultural imagery was not absent but functionally reframed. Embroidery was linked to women's

cooperative training; drum dance was tied to tourism infrastructure; and terraced farming was linked to tea-commerce digitisation. Symbols were economic engines, not aesthetic artefacts.

This difference matters because symbolic culture without agency reinforces folklore identity, while culture-as-economy portrays capability. Both newspapers depicted beauty, but only provincial reporting depicted labour. The shift from representation to re-presentation — culture as capital — marks heightened subjectivity that challenges dependency narratives.

5.4 Narrative Voice Distribution — Presence and Absence

Voice analysis revealed the strongest contrast in the dataset. In *People's Daily*, officials narrated the minorities. In *Hunan Daily*, minorities narrated themselves. The symbolic effect of this difference cannot be overstated. When development is described about a group but not through them, representation becomes paternalistic. When villagers speak directly, representation becomes dialogic.

Below is an illustrative contrast using curated textual style excerpts from the corpus (not actual original lines, but reflective reconstructions for academic analysis):

Excerpt A: People's Daily Style

“Under Party guidance, the village has stepped firmly into prosperity. Ethnic residents expressed gratitude and confidence in continuing the path of national rejuvenation.”

Excerpt B: Hunan Daily Style

“We planted tea together,” recalled villager Long Xianping. “It wasn’t easy, but we found buyers online. Now our children return home instead of leaving.”

The first excerpt positions minority identity as evidence of ideological success. The second position minority identity as narrator of developmental labour. Voice, in discourse analysis, is power. The power of transformation belongs to the speaker.

5.5 Synthesis of Comparative Findings

The central finding of this study is that media scale determines identity framing. *People's Daily* constructs minority groups as beneficiaries. *Hunan Daily* constructs them as agents. One performs representation. The other enables self-representation. Media, therefore, does not merely report development — it produces identity.

6. Discussion

The findings of this comparative analysis reveal that media representation of ethnic minorities in the context of China's Targeted Poverty Alleviation campaign is neither uniform nor ideologically neutral. Instead, identity construction varies significantly according to media scale and institutional function. In *People's Daily*, ethnic minorities appear primarily as recipients of state support and symbols of national development success. In *Hunan Daily*, they appear more frequently as participants, narrators, and innovators of economic transformation. This divergence reinforces the understanding that representation is not a passive process but an ideological act shaped by communicative authority, cultural proximity, and narrative intention.

Another question is the temporal constructions of the minority identity over the five years of TPA reporting. During the initial part of the campaign, the two newspapers tended to socialise minority communities using discourses of remoteness, struggle, and developmental necessity, thus making them familiar objects of intervention. The closer the campaign approached, proclaimed success, the more and more the language of closure was used in *People's Daily*, where minority villages seemed to act as the testament to policy success, gratitude, and nation-building. The same wide shift was registered by *Hunan Daily*, but in different words. Its subsequent reportings tended to tie minority identity to the entrepreneurial practice, cultural labour, and the local aspirations that were articulated by the locals. The turning point of the corpus was not, then, simply between poverty and prosperity, but between the administratively defined subjects and variously told political subjects.

This difference explains the bigger trend generated by the two reporting methods. In the mainstream press, the process of identity transformation was still more symbolic since the subject of the minority was included in an already prepared national narrative. Identity transformation in provincial press was more frequently inclined towards self-articulation due to the fact that development was expressed by means of household decision making, cooperative labour, and economic activating culture. The two outlets did not simply define change at varying levels. They attributed that change to other narrative ownership.

The dominance of beneficiary framing in *People's Daily* illustrates how central media consolidate political legitimacy through discursive construction. When minorities are “lifted out of poverty,” the grammatical structure itself removes

agency from local actors, attributing transformation to external intervention rather than internal initiative. This linguistic pattern corresponds with national framing objectives that emphasise Party leadership, unity, and governance competence (Li et al., 2024). The narrative reinforces an image of harmonious integration in which minorities progress because the state directs progress. Such representation aligns with Framing Theory, wherein selective emphasis — in this case, on state success — shapes interpretive boundaries for audiences (Entman, 1993). The result is a representational economy where gratitude replaces protagonism, and identity becomes evidence rather than expression.

In contrast, Hunan Daily demonstrates how representational agency emerges when narrative proximity increases. The inclusion of named individuals, local quotations, and culturally grounded micro-histories humanizes the developmental process. Here, minorities are not moved along a trajectory; they move themselves. They plant, harvest, strategise, negotiate markets, revive ancestral arts, and build cooperative enterprise. This discursive pattern corresponds with Representation Theory, which holds that identity is created through language, and those who speak themselves occupy their own subject-position (Buckley, 2020). Agency verbs — such as “decided,” “organised,” and “initiated” — redirect narrative power away from the state and towards the community. Even when government assistance is acknowledged, it appears as a partnership rather than a unilateral provision. Representation thus becomes dialogic rather than paternalistic.

These contrasting discourses reveal a vertical stratification of narrative roles in Chinese poverty reporting. The central press constructs the macro-ideological story; the provincial press constructs the human one (Tang & Mu, 2024). Neither representation is inherently more “true,” but each carries ideological consequences. The top-down narrative provides national unity and political validation but risks obscuring grassroots complexity. The bottom-up narrative reveals lived reality but remains structurally subordinate to the central narrative in terms of visibility and reach. Therefore, public perception is shaped more strongly by the symbolic beneficiary frame than by the participatory agency frame, because People’s Daily enjoys greater audience scale, institutional authority, and archival permanence (Gao et al., 2023).

From a CDA perspective, the most consequential observation is voice distribution. The presence or absence of direct minority speech signals where narrative power rests. In People’s Daily, minorities rarely speak in grammatical “I.” Instead, they appear as collective objects — “the villagers,” “the ethnic people,” “the community.” Their feelings, aspirations, and labour are narrated on their behalf. The voice that explains progress is external. In Hunan Daily, however, villagers frequently articulate their own experiences, revealing emotion, hesitation, frustration, and pride. Their speech transforms representation from symbolic inclusion to experiential presence. This aligns with Fairclough’s model, in which discursive practice determines who may legitimate meaning (Fairclough, 2015; Yue, 2022).

The implications of this representational structure extend beyond poverty discourse. When minorities are consistently framed as grateful recipients, public consciousness may internalize dependency narratives that overlook indigenous knowledge, environmental adaptation, and cultural entrepreneurship. The absence of voice creates habituated silence; communities appear thankful rather than thoughtful. Conversely, Hunan Daily reveals intellectual, emotional, and technical agency, suggesting that ethnic groups are not only transforming, but thinking through transformation. Voices captured at the local level should therefore be recognised not as supplementary anecdotes but as epistemic sources of developmental knowledge.

An additional insight emerges regarding cultural framing. In People’s Daily, minority culture functions as spectacle — a symbolic ritual of unity. In Hunan Daily, culture operates as an economic resource. Both frames affirm cultural importance, but only one acknowledges its productive power. When representation shifts from aesthetic display to skilled labor, identity is repositioned from performance to capability. This implication is critical for post-poverty revitalization, where cultural industry, intangible heritage, and rural tourism are predicted to drive sustainable economic growth. For such strategies to succeed, the media must depict minorities not as icons of tradition but as designers of future enterprise.

Taken together, the findings suggest that equitable representation requires two movements: an upward amplification of local voice into national circulation and a downward diffusion of national discourse into culturally meaningful interpretation. A balanced representational ecology should neither glorify success without context nor localize experience without visibility. Instead, it should foster narrative plurality where central and provincial discourse inform one another, allowing identity to be both symbolic and practical, unified and diverse, grateful and capable.

Therefore, the discussion leads to one central conclusion: Representation shapes identity, and identity shapes the future. If minorities continue to speak mainly in the provincial voice, while their national presence remains symbolic rather than expressive, cultural empowerment will remain unevenly distributed. The next stage of revitalization requires more than resource provision — it requires narrative redistribution.

7. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how ethnic minorities were represented in Chinese media during the Targeted Poverty Alleviation (TPA) campaign, comparing discourse construction in People’s Daily, as a central Party organ, and Hunan

Daily, as a provincial media outlet intimately situated within minority-populated regions. Through qualitative discourse analysis supported by Framing Theory, Critical Discourse Analysis, and Representation Theory, the study demonstrated clear divergence in linguistic strategy, narrative authority, and agency portrayal across news levels.

The findings established that People's Daily primarily constructed poverty alleviation as an achievement-centred narrative driven by state coordination and ideological unity. Minorities appeared largely as recipients of developmental transformation, framed through passive verbs and gratitude lexicons that located agency externally rather than internally. This beneficiary-centred representation is consistent with prior research that identifies central media as key instruments of legitimacy production and national cohesion building. Minority identity in this frame becomes symbolic — evidence of national progress rather than the originators of it.

In contrast, Hunan Daily provided a more human-centred representational landscape. Villagers were named, quoted, and positioned as decision-makers in their own transformation. Agency was embedded in verbs — organised, initiated, cultivated, and marketed — revealing minorities as self-directed actors navigating economic innovation, heritage industry revitalisation, and community entrepreneurship. Culture appeared not merely as aesthetic performance, but as productive economy and intellectual capital. This localised representation supports Hall's argument that identity is produced when social subjects speak rather than are spoken for (Hall, 1997). Minority agency becomes visible only when narrative proximity allows lived experience to be articulated without ideological mediation.

The comparative implication is therefore profound: media scale determines identity architecture. Where central discourse emphasises unity and political accomplishment, provincial discourse foregrounds emotion, labour, and cultural specificity. Neither representation is inherently negative — each plays a function within China's poverty governance communication system — but when one dominates the national memory while the other remains regional, representational imbalance emerges. For ethnic minorities to be perceived as equal civilisational contributors, their voices must circulate nationally, not locally alone.

Future revitalisation efforts in post-poverty China will require a shift in representational priority. Cultural heritage industries, rural creative economies, and community-led ecological agriculture now occupy central roles in sustainable development strategy. These sectors depend not merely on policy but on public recognition of minority capacity. Media must therefore transition from symbolic portrayal to participatory storytelling, amplifying minority agency as epistemic and entrepreneurial, not only grateful.

This study contributes to media representation scholarship by demonstrating that ethnic identity is not a product of culture alone, but of discourse architecture. When villagers speak in Hunan Daily, they exist as subjects with self-narrated futures. When they appear as gratitude markers in People's Daily, they exist as symbols belonging to a narrative larger than themselves. The challenge ahead is to reconcile these voices — not by erasing national unity, but by expanding national memory to include lived multiplicity.

In conclusion, Targeted Poverty Alleviation reshaped material landscapes — but media reshaped social meaning. To ensure equitable representation moving forward, minority voices should not only appear in regional discourse but ascend into national frameworks where policy meets identity. The media has the power to write people into history. It must now allow them to write themselves.

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Author contributions

Tian Xu was responsible for the initial drafting of the manuscript under academic supervision, data collection, conducting statistical analyses, and contributed to the interpretation of results. Dr. Azrina Husin conceptualized the study, designed the research framework, supervised the methodological procedures, and led the overall preparation of the manuscript. All authors reviewed, revised, and approved the final version of the manuscript and take responsibility for its content.

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