

# ***Making “The Other” from “The Self”: Ethnic Minority Tourism in the Age of Live Streaming***

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**Abstract:** The explosion of Ding Zhen’s popularity in the tourism economy is underpinned by the consumption of the othering of ethnic minorities in the discourse of Orientalism within contemporary China. Ding Zhen’s unexpected popularity shows the great power of new media in rural revitalization. Through new media, it can bring more audiences’ attention to the countryside and ethnic minorities in central and western China, which in turn can drive local tourism development and provide new ideas for rural development in ethnic minority areas in central and western China. Through several cases, especially Ding Zhen, this paper will explore how they, as ethnic minority subjects, publicize and promote themselves out? How did they objectify themselves? How does the state view this? This paper will focus on exploring the process of self-othering by ethnic minorities catering to Han Chinese on short video platforms. And it argues that we need to have a perspective that resists Orientalism of all kinds and empathize with the development dilemma of ethnic minorities.

## **1. Introduction: Short Video and Ethnic Minority Tourism**

At present, many tourism and cultural industries with ethnic characteristics are developing rapidly through the “east wind” of short videos, and many ethnic minorities have attracted a large number of tourists to their local tourism industry through short videos, which has greatly boosted the development of local tourism and cultural industries. With the development of the internet and the promotion of information projects in ethnic minority areas, people in ethnic minority areas are using self media and short video platforms to perform and spread their culture on a daily basis. Unlike the logic of “net celebrity” generation, which is usually based on their own personalized and original content such as their persona, performance and talent, ethnic minority “net celebrities” rely more on the rich cultural heritage of their people.

The most representative one is Ding Zhen (Tibetan name: Tenzin Tsundue), a Tibetan boy who became a “top stream netizen” overnight, with more than 2.7 million likes on a single video. On 11 November 2020, Ding Zhen, a 20-year-old Tibetan boy from Litang County, made his handsome face, dark skin, clear eyes and shy smile known to the internet world with a short video of less than 10 seconds. The video received tens of billions of views. On 25 November 2020, the 3-minute video,

*“Ding Zhen’s World”*, a promotional video for cultural tourism in Ganzi, Sichuan, was released on 25 November 2020.<sup>[1]</sup> In this video, Dingzhen’s unique authenticity, purity and beauty are reflected in the blue sky, white clouds, grasslands and yaks of his hometown Litang, creating an idyllic pastoral-like *“other world”* -- A world completely different from the hustle and bustle of the city.

Then Dingzhen was hired by a local state-owned enterprise to become a tourism ambassador for Litang, becoming a top netizen who collected over 10 billion flows. The traditional media played an active role in spreading the news about Ding Zhen, and even the spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Hua Chunying, tweeted three times in a row to promote him, and Ding Zhen’s influence spread abroad, with his story appearing on Japanese television. In South Korea, Ding Zhen once topped the Internet hot search list, triggering enthusiastic discussions among Korean netizens.....Up to now, *“Litang Ding Zhen”* has 11.088 million fans in Douyin and Kuaishou, and has received 83.648 million likes.<sup>[1]</sup> After Ding Zhen’s rapid rise to popularity, people are not only focusing on Ding Zhen himself, but also on Litang as a place. Ding Zhen’s unexpected popularity has shown people the great power of new media in rural revitalization. Through new media, it can bring more audiences’ attention to the countryside and ethnic minorities in China’s central and western regions, which in turn can drive local tourism development, which provides new ideas for rural development in China’s central and western ethnic minority regions.

## 2. The Logic of Aesthetic Narrative -- Ding Zhen and His Litang

Today is the age of entertainment, where the pressure of urban life forces urbanites to resort to entertainment content to relieve their mental anxiety. In an era where the internet and consumerism lend each other a hand, things in society appear as entertainment, people become subordinate to entertainment, and society eventually happens to be entertained to death. In urban culture, the countryside is the opposite existence to the city, and marketing with goods in the short video vertical is exactly the future path for the ethnic minority netizens, who can develop through the special characteristics of ethnic minority regions, such as the ethnic minority They can attract users’ attention through the purity of the people’s faces, the aura of the mountains and the beautiful natural scenery, and so on, in order to carry out short video marketing. Ding Zhen and Ding Zhen Litang have injected a fresh, natural and authentic *“yearning”* into the restless mental world of urban youth with their short video ads, catering to the youthful narrative style pursued by young internet users.

Ding Zhen has a series of videos, *“Ding Zhen’s Nature Notes”*, which has exploded on the internet, from Ding Zhen’s longing for and love of nature to his understanding of nomadic life, to *“advertise”* various types of local customs and folklore in Litang, also presenting the natural material landscape, the video focuses on details, in the sound of gurgling water, galloping horses and burning bonfires. A more informative space of perception is established. The short video advertisements about the *Khampa Hanzhi*<sup>1</sup>, live streaming with goods and horse races are all easy to resonate with young people. In another video, the 3-minute short video *“Dingzhen’s World”*, the narrator interprets the aesthetic points of the snowy mountains, grasslands, glaciers, temples and white pagodas of Litang through the perspective of Dingzhen, perfectly combining the sweetness and wildness of a Tibetan boy.

Through observation, we will find that the images of short videos are powerful, and to make the audience pay attention and generate interest in a very short period of time. Even purchasing power, it is necessary to focus on the images, through a visual experience with strong impact and emotional experience. The series of short video advertisements featuring Ding Zhen and Ding Zhen’s Litang have been effective through the short video platform, which has also brought huge traffic and realisation. In terms of colour transformation, the series of short video advertisements featuring Ding Zhen and Ding Zhen Litang have a very powerful expressive and psychological impact -- white pearl

<sup>1</sup> Khampa, a region in traditional Tibetan culture. The *Khampa hanzhi* has in a way become the symbol of Tibetan manhood.

horses, red Tibetan robes, dark skin with plateau characteristics, etc. are combined with blue sky, white clouds, snowy mountains, vast plateaus, grasslands and rare animals. As a universal “language”, colour can concisely summarize the possible meanings of things without words, making it clear that the advertised object is this and not that.<sup>[2]</sup>

From an artistic point of view, one of the most important elements of the series of short video commercials featuring Ding Zhen and Ding Zhen Litang is the authenticity and the link to the user.

<sup>[2]</sup> The short video ads were also created to capture the expression of individual desires in the age of self-media, presenting the mountains, water and love of Litang through the dynamics of the images. These daily lives, constructed through either improvisation or carefully curated creations, are a vibrant mirror image of life that meets the expectations of audiences in the age of self-media, shaping a new discourse that reveals a different kind of aesthetic desire. In addition, it makes use of dynamic camera techniques to create a dynamic atmosphere.

### 3. The Presentation of Internal Orientalism -- Ding Zhen and Tibetan Imagination

Behind Ding Zhen’s popularity is the long-standing public romanticisation of the “holy land of Tibet” and the symbols and narratives generated by a certain “internalised orientalism”. By “Orientalism”, I mean a “Western” view of the “East” as an object of gaze and imagination, as a way of setting up one’s own sense of superiority, or as a way of using the “cultural other” is used to reflect on and criticise one’s own shortcomings. The “internal Orientalism” refers to the fact that in the 1980s Han Chinese intellectuals sought and constructed the unique social habits and cultural traditions of various ethnic minorities according to their own imagination and design, based on the needs of Han Chinese society and culture.<sup>[3]</sup> Twenty years ago, Lopez said that “we are all prisoners of Shangri-La”, but most of “us” are not convinced, and not only are they still obsessed with the myth of Shangri-La, but they also insist that Shangri-La should transform the whole of Tibet. While the “Tibet fever” in the West today is hardly sustainable, the tone of the mainstream “Tibetan discourse” in the West remains the same, with the Chinese becoming the new “prisoners of Shangri-La”. Tibet is a very important symbol in the Orientalist imagination -- first as a utopian “Shangri-La” in the bestselling British novel *Horizon*, published in 1933, which became a spiritual repository for Europeans overshadowed by the clouds of war; and then in the 1960s the counterculture movement gave spiritual and political legitimacy to the hippies.

According to the anthropologist Louisa Schein, it was in the 1980s that “(internal) Orientalism” emerged on a large scale in China through tourism. In the post-Cultural Revolution era, on the one hand, the restoration and promotion of minority cultures was included in the “reorganisation” that followed the end of the Cultural Revolution. On the other hand, one of the prominent elements of China’s self-presentation towards the world was the “cultural prosperity” of a multi-ethnic nation, as evidenced by the parades of ethnic minorities in colourful national costumes at festivals such as the 1990 Asian Games in Beijing and the 1993 People’s Congress.<sup>[3]</sup> Shen Weirong says that Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism have also been the subject of long-standing imagery in Han Chinese cultural traditions, and that there have been two distinct tendencies to demonise and mythologise them. The language and storyline of Tibetan films and literary works published in China today are already comparable to their Western counterparts.<sup>[4]</sup> Moreover, this is fundamentally different from the phenomenon of “internal Orientalism” that emerged in the 1980s, as it is no longer just an imaginary and design of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism based on the needs of Han Chinese society and cultural life, but more an internalisation of the Western Orientalist vision of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism.

In the dichotomy of “Han-Tibetan”, Ding Zhen also belongs to *the gazed at Other*. Perhaps “innocence” and “wildness” are not the entire character and life of the Tibetan people. But the image of Ding Zhen as a Tibetan is perceived, constructed and expressed through other peoples. The

costumes and Dingzhen's movements in this group are a way of imagining Tibetan civilization in the fashion world. Due to the need to cater to the tastes and preferences under the gaze of other peoples, the costumes in the drawings deviate significantly from the actual Tibetan dress. We can draw on Said's orientalism to understand this cultural exchange between different ethnic groups, arguing that in a sense, from the viewer's stereotype that "ethnic minorities are all good singers and dancers and passionate", "orientalism" has already internalised itself.<sup>[5]</sup> By comparing the two groups of ethnicity and gender, the specificity of the image of Ding Zhen can be better analysed, pointing out the nature of the gaze on Ding Zhen. This internalised "orientalism" may create another "wishful thinking" fantasy for the minority in western Sichuan through the screen in the internet age.

While the officialdom keeps outlining and fantasising the spirit of pastoralism, it forgets a problem that has been left behind since the beginning. Today there is a real need to find a pastoral spirit, but we have to face up to a problem. When Dingzhen becomes a tourist totem, can what people are desperately looking for really be found? In earlier years the legends about Tibet had taken hold, so much so that today, Dingzhen's appearance made netizens think for a while that Dingzhen's hometown was in Tibet. This led to two bizarre Weibo searches, "*Thought Ding Zhen was in Tibet*" and "*Why do many people think Ding Zhen is in Tibet*". The scholar Saeed once said in *Orientalism*: "*The essence of Orientalism is Western centrism.*"<sup>[5]</sup> To put it succinctly, it means that we look at things from the perspective of the West, to see and examine them. A condescending posture is used to construct an imaginary "advanced and backward", "developed and developing". In fact it is this mode of thinking that has given birth to the imaginary Tibet, and we see that today many people can give a vague and consistent answer about it. Tibet is the Potala Palace, the endless pilgrimages and spiritual cleansing. And these unified, vague notions are a kind of Orientalism, where people completely cut themselves off from the cultural environment of the destination, portraying it in a wishful image, backward, barbaric or even obscurantist. On the basis of this, one sees and explores with a curious eye. When the place does not live up to people's imaginary expectations, it is natural to say: "*This originally simple place has completely degenerated into a commercialised tourist town.*"

#### 4. The Other and the construction by the Other

"The other" is anyone or anything other than the self and is important for the formation of the subject's "sense of self", without which humans cannot know themselves. "The other" is an important element in the realist construction of the self-image, and it helps or forces the subject to accept a worldview that defines its place and gives it meaning. "Othering" is not only about identity, but also about image construction. In short-video minority culture communication, "the self" is the minority group, while "the other" refers to communication subjects other than the village group, and the booming development of short-video has facilitated the communication of minority culture, thus the phenomenon of "othering" has emerged. The phenomenon of "othering" has emerged.<sup>[6]</sup> When presenting video content and constructing the image of the ethnic group, Ding Zhen and other ethnic minority "net celebrities" are to a large extent aiming to attract fans and audiences, and in order to create a gimmick, the image of many ethnic minority "net celebrities" is positioned as In order to create a gimmick, the "mystery" element is very high in the image positioning of many "netizens", and the mysterious minority culture is used as a highlight to attract fans and audiences, which means that the self is othered. However, the frequent and repeated use of such elements makes the information received by the audience about ethnic minorities very homogeneous, thus leading to the construction of self-othering of ethnic minority groups.

Based on the psychological desire to attract more followers, the minority "net celebrities" amplify and even exaggerate their image to resemble the stereotypical view of the Xiangxi minority held by outsiders. At the same time, they draw inspiration from film and television works related to Xiangxi

minority culture. This influence can be seen in their external image, environmental elements, physical movements, and language. By imitating and exaggerating these aspects, they aim to further deepen or even challenge existing perceptions. The image of the minority in Xiangxi presented to cater to the audience has to a certain extent deviated from and lost its own value, and as “net celebrities” of the minority in Xiangxi, they are no longer the transmitters of the minority culture, but are constantly constructing symbols for consumption by their fans, thus losing their own subjectivity. “Beautiful”, “Sacred”, “Pure land”.....in ethnic minority “net celebrities”. For fans and audiences, these labels attached to Xiangxi minority “net celebrities” are only short-lived selling points to attract them.<sup>[5]</sup> As the culture of Xiangxi’s ethnic minorities is deconstructed by short videos, the culture itself is also deconstructed in terms of its cultural values, and some of the culture is gradually becoming overly entertaining and vulgarised by the infiltration of consumerism on short video platforms.

In the case of Xiangxi’s ethnic minority “netizens”, the “carnival” of the short-video era has provided a stage for them to showcase themselves and spread their culture. However, in the process of this development, they are inevitably caught up in the storm of capital markets and commodity symbols. Baudrillard pointed out in his sociology of consumption that the development of consumerism has made the purpose of consumption solely to consume, and that the subjectivity of the individual is gradually lost in the process.<sup>[7]</sup> For example, in an interview with Xingxing of the ancient city of *Ancient Town of Fenghuang*, a minority celebrity in western Hunan, she mentions that she deliberately prepares many sets of Hunan minority costumes for short videos and live broadcasts, saying: “*Fans are more curious about the life of our minority, and they often comment under the videos I bought many sets of ethnic costumes to wear when I shoot short videos, but I don’t usually wear them.*” In a participatory observation of Jin Jin, a Xiangxi minority “netizen”, it was revealed that Jin Jin’s videos show her living in a minority village in western Hunan, living an isolated and untouched life. In reality, however, Jin Jin does not live in the village, but in the county, but returns to the village every time she needs to shoot a short video.<sup>[8]</sup>

Along with “*The Othering of the Self*”, there is also “*Egoisation of the Other*”. Some of the creators selectively filmed and edited the beautiful side of the village to present it to the audience, creating a “mimetic environment” for the audience about the culture of the minority villages. Throughout the platforms such as *Douyin* and *Kuaishou*, in more and more homogenised short videos of ethnic minority culture, the countryside is portrayed as a “utopian” idyll, and the ethnic minority villages are “self-imposed” as a paradise by the creators, constantly catering to “the other”’s perception of rural culture. However, the real countryside is not all idyllic, it is more about the hard work, and the othering of short videos has led to an overly simplistic and one-sided perception of rural development and rural culture by some uninformed audiences. In response, the anthropologist Jenny Chio, in her book *A Landscape of Travel*, a study of Miao farming in Guizhou, pointed out that there are two kinds of mobility embedded in the tourism industry pathway: on the one hand, tourists travelling to enjoy a comfortable and leisurely time outside of their normal lives at the destination. On the other hand, there is the labour and pain, and in addition to describing the specific labour of local hospitality, she finds that many of the Hmong residents are not so “local”, having worked outside the home village for many years before returning to enter the tourism industry.<sup>[9]</sup> Thus, live streaming does not only mean comfortable travel, but also strenuous and dangerous work. The story of Ding Zhen is one in which his brother and uncle, and even the white-haired cadres of a neighbouring village, have gained popularity as a result of the live broadcast, while in Litang what is not being broadcast is the labour pains of the locals making a living.

## 5. Conclusion

The popularity of Ding Zhen in the tourism economy is based on the consumption of the otherness



of ethnic minorities in the discourse of Orientalism within contemporary China. Behind the “Ding Zhen” phenomenon is the use of a sense of physical space created by the short video to generate such a huge interest in an unfamiliar region. The Han Chinese imagination and construction of the cultural image of “the other”, “the othering” of the minority, as a way of distinguishing “the self” from “the other”, has a long history in China. The imagination and construction of cultural images of ethnic minorities has also evolved and taken on contemporary qualities, such as the short video-driven tourism of ethnic minorities discussed in this article. This is the case with the phenomenon of “internal Orientalism” described by Louisa Shain. Today’s modernisation and the popularity of consumer culture have made it easier and more convenient for ethnic minorities to express themselves, and have greatly increased their willingness and motivation to self-represent (and produce culture), making it easier for them to express themselves in the form of “self-othering” in the process of marketing themselves.

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