
Wang Hong's Representations of Rural Life and Yunnan

—A Study on Dianxi Xiaoge

General introduction

Owning 1.18 million fans on Bilibili and over 9.5 million subscribers on YouTube¹, Dianxi Xiaoge (滇西小哥) is a video creator from Baoshan (保山), Yunnan province that enjoys considerable popularity domestically as well as internationally. She illustrates herself as 'a native-born Yunnan girl'. Her video contents center on cooking for her family, alongside with a depiction of the beauty of Yunnan countryside and a simple, unspoiled folkway. Compared to many other rural cuisine accounts on various platforms, Dianxi Xiaoge stands out because of her distinctiveness and high quality of each episode. However, there are still several aspects of Dianxi Xiaoge that we need to explore. While portraying an almost anti-commercialized life in rural Yunnan, the monetization of Dianxi Xiaoge account still conforms to the pattern of influencer economy, or Wang Hong (網紅) economy in China. What's more, the elements that highlight her videos are still typical representations of exotic Yunnan.

This article will first analyze how Dianxi Xiaoge presents her rural life and why she gains global popularity. Then, there will be a discussion on the seemingly paradox between the commodification of Dianxi Xiaoge and the anti-commercialism throughout her videos. Finally, focusing on her influence in Yunnan tourism, the article will examine her representations of Yunnan in a perspective of the exoticism and ethnic Yunnan stereotype.

Idyllic country life in Baoshan, Yunnan

Dianxi Xiaoge's videos fall into a category called rural video, which has been prevalent in China. This particular kind of video is about showing different aspects of Chinese rural life, including people, food, customary practices and so on. In the spring tide of burgeoning we-media industry, Dianxi Xiaoge stands out among many video creators of the same type. The success of her channel is inseparable from the quality contents, which are representations of her life in the countryside.

First, Dianxi Xiaoge's rural life is refined. Each episode contains well-prepared and well-arranged food, clean and tidy kitchen and almost documentary-style of shooting. What she presents in the videos has a certain sense of occasion. In the episode of Shouzhuafan (手抓飯)², the finished dish is colorful and appetizing, because Penji

¹ 1.18 million fans on Bilibili and 9.55 million fans on YouTube on November 20th, 2022

² This episode was launched in 21st May, 2021.

colors the rice using natural pigments from plants and arranges the rice as concentric circles. This homecooked meal is a luxury in daily life for many people, for they strive for a living and are exhausted in trivial chores every day. However, in Dianxi Xiaoge's world, even the most ordinary day deserves a celebration. Second, though refined, Dianxi Xiaoge remains to be down-to-earth and never avoids to show the imperfection in the seemingly perfect rural life. Though living in the picturesque scenery, she still needs to take care of their cultivations all year round. It is commonplace for her to get hurt, cut, sunburned and dirty, and the toils are enormous and laborious. Obviously, country life is not for everyone. Third, Dianxi Xiaoge takes advantage of the natural environment of Yunnan province as well as local elements like wooden house, handmade home supplies, and stone-paved farmyards to create a cozy and pleasant atmosphere. There are many Danmu (弹幕) on Bilibili saying 'Already screenshot' and 'Pause for the wallpaper' whenever the stunning scenic beauty of Yunnan appears on screen. Thanks for the 4K technology, the audience are able to go on a virtual trip in Yunnan's countryside following Dianxi Xiaoge's camera. Last but not the least, various kinds of soundtracks compose a harmonious symphony. Soothing background music is throughout the videos, along with almost an ASMR way of Dianxi Xiaoge's actions: cooking, cutting, plucking, even stepping on the grassland. The Yunnan dialect helps as well, as an important component of locality. People in her videos express themselves more naturally and comfortably when speaking the vernacular, thus their emotion expression is more contagious, even though the audience cannot understand their talking.

When you open the comment boxes under Dianxi Xiaoge's channel on YouTube, you can see people from worldwide expressing their likes toward Penji (盆雞)³, which is the nickname of Dianxi Xiaoge. No matter where people come from, 'city', 'peaceful', 'family', 'paradise', and 'beautiful' are always the keywords. We can see that one of the most common reasons why people love to watch Dianxi Xiaoge is that people who live a modern city life aspire such a slow-paced rural life. Her videos meet people's needs deep down their heart. People get tired of forests of steels and concretes. They want to escape from the cities and watching Dianxi Xiaoge could perform as psychological compensation. There is absolutely no pressure viewing Dianxi Xiaoge. Instead, her life can be a way of healing from the stress and anxiety in reality life. As for those who leave their hometowns for work, these videos call on the nostalgia and wishes for family reunion. Watching Penji and her family having dinners and living together can be an alternative to some extent for them.

³ This is the nickname given by her grandmother. Similar nicknames are Apenjie (阿盆姐), Penjie (盆姐).

There are other reasons for the broad audience. First, there is no language bar of her videos. Her storyline is almost the same: cook local food and enjoy the food with her family. The dialogues are limited. Thus, people may not know anything about either Chinese or Yunnan dialect, but there is no impact on viewing experience. Furthermore, the usage of food as the cultural symbol is one of the most understandable topics within transcultural communications. We can see that Dianxi Xiaoge's idyllic rural narration receive considerable popularity both at home and overseas.

The existing paradox of anti-commercialism and commodification

As an important and fascinating part of Dianxi Xiaoge, her hands-on approach has been highlighted and of great importance. From planting to harvesting, from raw material to condiments and foods, Penji shows an exquisite skill of homemaking and handcraft. For instance, in the episodes about bayberry⁴ (楊梅), she not only uses the fruit to make desserts and snacks, but also brew wine and vinegar. The audience are impressed by her rich living experience and her capable hands. Moreover, Penji's practices are believed to be natural and anti-commercialized, for she seems to have little involvement in commercial manufacturing.

However, when Dianxi Xiaoge started to promote her own branded products like rose cakes (玫瑰鮮花餅), people could not help wondering why Penji also embarked on the monetization process of Wang Hong economy. Some claim that Dianxi Xiaoge building up her own brand is a 'betrayal' to what she has been conveying. For others, selling commodities even caused disillusion. In a certain sense, their concern is reasonable because in the era of mass production, people long for authenticity. In post-industrial society, people are overwhelmed by reproducible, even fake and forged products and works. Just like what Benjamin (1935) claimed, mechanical reproduction alters both the physical production and the quality of the presence. Eventually, it damages the authenticity. Although his argument is made based on art objects, it makes some sense in Dianxi Xiaoge's case. Some people argued that commodity and commercialization contradict with the image of Dianxi Xiaoge. They began to question about the authenticity of her handiwork, which is believed to be the core of her videos. People look for the real craftsmanship rather than mass products. Therefore, when Dianxi Xiaoge starts her own brand, people find it difficult to pull themselves out of the anti-commercialized fantasy.

In fact, Wang Hong economy itself is not a completely new thing. Wang Hong economy is defined⁵ as a new economic model that relies on the Internet, especially

⁴ There are two episodes on bayberry. The first one is launched on 13th June, 2019 and the second on 26th June, 2021.

⁵ “網紅經濟,” accessed November 30, 2022,

the mobile internet communication and marketing on social media platforms. Wang Hong economy congregates a mass of social focus. Next, large fan communities and targeted markets form accordingly. Influencers from all categories are able to begin their own businesses and start their own brands if they want. For example, in other countries, there is Jeffree Star in beauty industry and Aimee Song in fashion business. In China, one of the most well-known representatives of Wang Hong economy is Li Ziqi (李子柒), whose personal brand has been well-developed selling different kinds of food to people.

Along this way of consideration, Wang Hong economy may not be treated as a total enemy. According to Han Li (2020)⁶, ‘the very gesture of anti-commercialization and only be realized though the commodification of her digital productions’. For influencers themselves, they can save some energy and money using the extant fan bases when starting. For customers, it would be easy to trace and supervise goods quality because of the high exposure and strong online presence of influencers. Dianxi Xiaoge’s products take ‘a bite of Yunnan’ and ‘organic’ as selling points to attract customers who seek for uniqueness and original quality of food. Selling food of regional specialties not only offers non-Yunnan people an experience of savor and promote Yunnan culinary culture, but also provide new choices for Yunnan people who are far away and miss the taste of home. Besides, food production can boost local economy and lead to job creation. After all, to purchase or not is a matter of personal will. Dianxi Xiaoge’s brand and products are still at the initial stage. It will take some more time to see the growth and reputation.

Promoting Yunnan in an ethnic tourism way

Dianxi Xiaoge’s videos on Bilibili are categorized into columns, for example: One Fruit in One Meal (一席一果), Ethnic Taste (一族一味), Seasoning Four Seasons (四季調料), Delicious Food (美食視頻) and so on. There is no doubt that as a social media influencer, Dianxi Xiaoge showcases the natural beauty and cultural landscape of Yunnan province. Her videos surely attract domestic and foreign tourists. The local government of Baoshan selected her to be the promotion ambassador in 2020, indicating that she helps facilitate local tourism. Besides, the value orientation of her channel fits the core values in Chinese context, one of which is minzu (民族) solidarity

<https://wiki.mbalib.com/zhtw/%E7%BD%91%E7%BA%A2%E7%BB%8F%E6%B5%8E>.

⁶ Li, Han (2020). "From Disenchantment to Reenchantment: Rural Microcelebrities, Short Video, and the Spectacle-ization of the Rural Lifescape on Chinese Social Media". *International Journal of Communication*. **14**: 3776–3779. ISSN 1932-8036.

of 56 ethnic minorities. Dianxi Xiaoge's YouTube presence is considered as one of the 'important participants in China's current cultural export'.⁷ Therefore, it is not difficult to understand why Dianxi Xiaoge could establish an official channel on YouTube, a banned website in China. Instead of saying that there is governmental support, it would be more accurate to say that there is a governmental tacit approval.

However, the representations of Yunnan province in her videos are still stereotyped. Yunnan province in her camera is still *that* static *Shangri-la*, full of ethnic charm (少數民族風情), and exoticism. By exoticism, I mean there is a divide between ethnic minorities and Han (or Zhongyuan 中原) customs and traditions. Yunnan was not until 1276 that it became a branch secretariat and was long regarded to be remote and underdeveloped. Thus, it is not surprising that indigenous Yunnan culture was perceived exotic. Also, by exoticism, I mean there is a divide in socio-economic and cultural status between the underprivileged ethnic minorities and the people from prosperous areas. People in ethnic minority groups usually act as those who come from the ancient time, and walk out of the drapery of history. They are exhibited in a way which is in stark contrast to the new, modern-day society, and they are constantly being seen and being gazed.

The first and foremost exotic representation is the food. Due to natural and geographical conditions of Yunnan province, people have summarized a set of survival rules, as said 'if you live on a mountain, you live off the mountain.' Penji lives in western Yunnan, where people love to eat sour and spicy food. With advantaged natural resources and climate, ingredients are fresh and diverse. In the videos, Penji either cook with less common ingredients, like topical fruit, wild herbs, mushrooms and insects; or she cook common materials in an unusual way, for instance, using kiwis as the base of barbecue sauce for roasted whole lamb. People love to watch these unfamiliar, even strange foods, for they can discover difference and excitement in the exoticism (Okeschuk 2017). Videos about mushrooms (野生菌) and mushroom hot pot (野生菌火鍋)⁸ are popular on Bilibili, for the love-hate relationship between mushrooms and Yunnan people has become a trending topic on social media—Chinese netizens are especially curious about the 'mushroom hallucination'⁹ caused by food poisoning.

⁷ “從李子柒再到滇西小哥，看中國網紅如何用傳統文化征服世界。”新聞速遞, accessed November 30, 2022, http://embachinese.cb.cityu.edu.hk/Home/Index/get_sdxq/new_id/306.

⁸ Episodes about mushrooms are launched on summer of 2017, 2020 and 2022, among which the one on 29th July, 2020 is most viewed (nearly 1.25 million on Bilibili).

⁹ The local expression is 'seeing little people after eating mushrooms' (吃菌見小人). Basically, it is one of the symptoms of food poisoning after eating uncooked, undercooked or poisonous mushrooms. It is now used in a

Despite of the exotic culinary culture, Penji also provides her audience with exotic cultural experiences. In the episode of Dragon Boat Festival in 2022, Penji sets out early from home and takes the audience on a short trip in the local fair— Hua Jie (花街). In Ethnic Taste, four ethnic minority groups in Yunnan- Bulang (布朗), Lahu (拉祜), Wa (佯) and Naxi (納西) are filmed. In each episode, Penji are dressed in colorful minzu costumes, and do signature hair styles decorated with ethnic accessories. People from these ethnic groups welcome Penji by singing folk songs or with wish messages in native languages. Penji visits their houses with distinct architectural styles, has dinners with them, and does folk dances with them by the campfires. In Bulang village¹⁰, Penji joins in the local ethnic ritual. People give their tributes to the god, light incense and say Paaileng Teachings of the Decreased (帕哎冷遺訓) under the leading of the elderly in the tribe. The speech is mainly about respecting mother nature and protecting gifts of nature-the tea mountain. These four episodes are of high quality and transcend mere gourmet show, a real cultural feast.

For people who have not yet been to Yunnan, Dianxi Xiaoge's representations help them to embody the place, from an obscure and abstract concept of 'the South of the Colorful Cloud' (彩雲之南) to a place that people from all ethnic groups grow, live and thrive. This kind of representations can be recognized as a result and extension of ethnic tourism. Yunnan has 25 ethnic minorities which consist of a third of its total population. Yunnan government put forward the strategy of 'building an ethnic cultural province' in 1998. Yunnan began to develop ethnic tourism using ethnic culture as main resources. The act was deemed to be beneficial to preserving ethnic culture as well as facilitating local economy. The practices did bring many benefits, economically in particular. However, as a result, the representation of a place tends to be static and the stereotypes can possibly be reinforced. When we think ethnic tourism as a process of intercultural encounters. The arrival of tourists just lays emphasis on binary differences between rural and urban, as well as modern and tradition (Feifan Xie 2011).

The ethnic Yunnan is exotic and 'frozen' in past times, mass media tend to portray them as ethnic minorities far away in the mountains. And their lives are narrated as some sort of cultural spectacle in an almost performative way, just like what has been exhibiting in Yunnan Ethnic Folk Villages in Kunming. People find it difficult to resist exotic representations of outlandish people (Knellwolf and McCalman 2002). The

wider meaning as having hallucination when someone is experiencing mushroom food poisoning.

¹⁰ The episode is launched on 8th June, 2022.

purpose of tourists is to arrive in a new place to find something new, breaking the norms and commonsense and leading to foreign feelings (Huggan 2001). People want to experience something unavailable within their easy reach. From this perspective, the desire of the tourists is understandable. Along this line of consideration, the exoticism is somehow unavoidable due to the natural, historical and cultural uniqueness.

However, sometimes the exoticism is just applied to confirm the imaginary of the majority or to solely satisfy the desire for the grotesque. As Bhabha (1992) once argued, the representations of cultural differences reveal the underlying power relations, which are unequal. This problem could only get worse when commodification and capital start to intervene, for whatever values of cultural differences eventually succumb to exoticism (Huggan 2001). To conform to the tourist gaze, ethnic Yunnan became and remains to be the exotic 'Other' to people from other places. In *Ethnic Taste*, the special episodes, Dianxi Xiaoge on the one hand, does promote Yunnan and ethnic culture of the four minority groups. Yet, on the other hand, the narrations of the stories still use ethnic people and their lives as an exhibition for people to gaze upon. Surely, these local people are hospitable and do have these and other traditional practices. But these representations are not their whole way of lives.

This is not just the problem of Dianxi Xiaoge channel, but a problem in most of the representations of Yunnan province. How to strike a balance between the modern and the traditional, between ethnic Yunnan and non-ethnic Yunnan? How about making some integration of ethnic features and new media formats? What about talking about some new changes in ethnic people's lives? To what extent their customs are still being observed? How we can help in preserving their languages, tales and other art forms? Perhaps we need to transform our mindset on this issue and create something new when representing Yunnan.

Conclusion

Dianxi Xiaoge has received support and commendation from all over the world. She is nowadays more than a promoter of Yunnan local culture, but plays a crucial role in introducing China to the world. This article applies textual analysis on Dianxi Xiaoge to study her rural life depictions, the paradox of anti-commercialization and commodification, and exotic representations of Yunnan. The purpose of this paper is not for criticizing or denying her contributions to preserving and advocating local culture. Rather, it is about seeing through the surface. Still, the representations of natural and cultural landscapes are attractive, thus making her videos worth watching.

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