

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Doing Ethnicity: Multi-layered Ethnic Scripts in Contemporary China

Jingyu Mao

Bielefeld University, Bielefeld, Germany
Email: jingyu.mao@uni-bielefeld.de

Abstract

Drawing on lengthy ethnographic fieldwork with ethnic performers in South-West China, this article seeks to explore the multi-layered ethnic scripts in contemporary China. Ethnic performers are people who perform ethnic songs and dances in restaurants or tourist sites, most of whom are rural–urban migrants from ethnic minority backgrounds. Ethnic performers’ ambivalences regarding whether they are “authentic minorities” points to the inadequacy of attempting to understand ethnicity in an essentialized way. Understanding ethnicity as something people do rather than who they are, the concept of “ethnic scripts” is proposed as a conceptual tool to illuminate the cultural and social repertoires which deeply shape people’s understanding of and ways of doing ethnicity. By exploring the multi-layered meaning of ethnic scripts in contemporary China, this article highlights the ways that ethnic scripts are closely related to migrant performers’ emotions and sense of self, and addresses the fact that ethnic scripts are inherently gendered.

摘要

本文通过对中国西南地区的民族表演者进行长时间的民族志田野调研，试图探索当代中国多层次的民族脚本。民族表演者是在餐馆或旅游景点表演民族歌舞的人，他们大多是来自少数民族背景的城乡移民。民族表演者对于自己是否是“地道的少数民族”的矛盾心理表明，以本质化的方式理解民族性是不够的。通过将民族性理解为人们所做的事情而不是他们是谁，“民族脚本”被提出来作为一种概念工具，以阐明深深塑造人们对民族性的理解和‘做民族’的方式的文化和社​​会剧目。通过探讨民族脚本在当代中国的多层次含义，本文强调了民族脚本与移民表演者的情感和自我意识密切相关的方式，以及民族脚本本身具有性别特征的事实。

Keywords: ethnicity; ethnic performance; ethnic scripts; doing ethnicity; gender; emotion

关键词: 民族; 民族表演; 民族脚本; 做民族; 性别; 情感

This article draws on the case of ethnic performers in South-West China to reflect on the meaning of being ethnic in contemporary China. The ethnic performers on which this study focuses are on the supply side of ethnic tourism, performing ethnic songs and dances for audiences including restaurant diners and tourists at scenic spots. Ethnic performance (*minzu biao'yan* 民族表演) is not foreign to many Chinese people, as the images of ethnic minority people dancing and singing are prevalent in many cultural spheres, including textbooks for students, the annual Spring Festival Gala and many ethnic tourism sites, including “ethnic folk villages” (*minzu cun* 民族村), where ethnic performances are showcased for mostly Han audiences.¹ Ethnic performance has become increasingly popular in commercialized settings, as more and more businesses incorporate ethnic performance. While representations of ethnic performance are prevalent, performers’ own voices tend to be marginalized and silenced. This article, based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork and 60 in-depth interviews, provides a detailed account of ethnic performers’ own experiences of work, especially how their daily

¹ See Yang 2011; Chu 2015.

encounters with ethnicity shape their understanding of ethnicity. It specifically focuses on how performers' ambivalence regarding whether they are "authentic" ethnic minorities leads us to think about ethnicity as something people do rather than who they are, and on the multi-layered "ethnic scripts" that shape people's understanding and practices of ethnicity.

Most of the ethnic performers that I studied were rural–urban migrants, and many (but not all) of them came from ethnic minority backgrounds, including the Yi, Hani, Lahu, Wa and Dai ethnicities. According to official statistics, there are 55 state-recognized ethnic minority groups in China, which make up 8.49 per cent of the population, while the Han make up the 91.51 per cent majority. These officially defined *minzu* 民族 categories are based on the Ethnic Classification Project carried out by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the 1950s, which gave formal recognition to 55 groups from over 400 groups that filed applications for recognition. This project is problematic in many ways, since it undermines the rights and interests of some ethnic groups in order to maintain a unified picture of the People's Republic of China (PRC).² Moreover, the Ethnic Classification Project has made *minzu* categories institutionalized and formalized, with every citizen's ID card clearly classifying one's *minzu* since the onset of ID card usage in 1984. A child's ethnicity is registered according to his/her parents' ethnicity, and he/she is eligible to file an application to change ethnic registration after reaching adulthood.³

Such rigid ethnic registration makes one wonder about the possible discrepancy between registered ethnic identities and subjective understandings of ethnicity. Although under-researched, such a discrepancy was highlighted during my fieldwork, as many informants said, "I am not an authentic ethnic minority person" (*wo bushi zhengzong de shaoshu minzu* 我不是正宗的少数民族), despite being officially registered as one. Rather than being a personal problem, the feeling of being "inauthentic" is a public issue. Although the fluidity of ethnic identity has increasingly been identified,⁴ it has rarely been taken as an issue in its own right, and there is not enough theorization about how we could understand such fluidity through sociological lenses. Therefore, drawing on the case of ethnic performers, this article seeks to provide a novel lens to understand the fluidity of ethnicity in contemporary China. Inspired by the "doing gender" approach,⁵ and the theory of "sexual scripts,"⁶ this article proposes the concept of "ethnic scripts" to recognize how the broader cultural and social repertoire regarding ethnicity deeply shapes the ways in which people "do" ethnicity in their everyday lives. This article further demonstrates the different ways in which performers interact with ethnic scripts, including the following: (1) Some feel that they are not "authentic" ethnic minorities; (2) some learn to partly embrace the scripts for economic advancement and social recognition; (3) some take pride in learning the scripts because they see themselves as preserving and promoting authentic ethnic minority culture; (4) some are required to perform scripts that conflict with ideas of respectability in their personal lives; (5) some have conflicting self-representations in different spaces. There are myriads ways that individuals position themselves against the socially constructed prescriptive notions of ethnicity. This also points to the multi-layered nature of ethnic scripts, and how ethnic scripts are closely related to people's emotions and sense of self and are inherently gendered.

Researching Ethnic Performers in South-West China

This article is based on six months of ethnographic fieldwork in a small city in Yunnan province, South-West China, from 2016 to 2017. In order to preserve the anonymity of my interlocutors,

2 Harrell 1995; Schein 2000; Mullaney 2011; Zang 2015.

3 For mixed-*minzu* children, parents could decide the *minzu* category of their children.

4 Leibold 2010.

5 West and Zimmerman 1987.

6 Simon and Gagnon 1986.

I will call this city Green City. Yunnan is home to 25 officially recognized ethnic minority groups, while Green City is home to 14 such groups. Green City's multi-ethnic culture has consistently been a highlighted point in its tourism industry. Unlike Xinjiang or Tibet, Yunnan is known for its relatively peaceful ethnic relations. During a visit to Yunnan, President Xi Jinping expressed his hope that Yunnan would strive to become a "model region of ethnic solidarity."⁷ Ethnic performance has become increasingly popular in Green City and elsewhere in China, becoming an important tourist attraction for (mostly Han) tourists longing to get a sense of "authentic" ethnic culture. Adding the fact that Green City is among the most poverty-stricken areas in China, ethnic performance has become an important source of revenue, as it ties in closely with the city's effort to "escape from poverty" and develop the local economy.

I undertook participant observation in one restaurant and two tourist sites that featured ethnic performances: Waterfall Restaurant, Tea Park and Forest Park,⁸ and conducted in-depth interviews with 45 ethnic performers from these three sites and 15 service workers outside of them. It used to be the case that people had to go to theatres to watch ethnic performances. Nowadays, people can do that at their dining tables, as is the case at Waterfall Restaurant, where ethnic performers are also waiters and waitresses of the restaurant. Performers dress in colourful traditional ethnic clothes and are ready to perform ethnic songs and dances at guests' tables when called upon. The content of the performances is drastically altered for the purposes of ethnic tourism and has little to do with what is practised in villages beyond tourists' gaze. Generally, they perform the ritual of toasting wine to guests while singing, during which one performer massages a guest's shoulders while forcing him or her to drink wine. A similar ritual of toasting wine also featured in my other two field sites, alongside a staged show of ethnic song and dance. The ritual of toasting and accompanying guests' meals with song and dance is called *bancan* 伴餐. As I argued elsewhere, ethnic performance is inherently a form of interactive service work, with the close proximity encounters between performers and guests becoming an important part of the work.⁹ These encounters and interactions are deeply shaped by the perception of ethnicity, and it is crucial for performers to leave guests with the impression that they are interacting with "authentic" ethnic minorities, despite their deep ambivalence over such an identity.

"I Am Not Authentic": The Ambivalence of Being Ethnic in Contemporary China

One of the biggest fieldwork surprises for me was that many ethnic performers are not actually "authentic" ethnic minorities – some of them are Han, while others are registered as ethnic minorities while having little recognition of such an identity. Hearing that I was intending to do research on ethnic minority migrants, some of the informants even suggested that I was looking in the wrong place. Some of them suggested that I look for the authentic minorities in remote, mountainous areas, rather than in cities, and especially not in places where ethnic performance was staged for guests.¹⁰

Kai was a tourist guide at Tea Park. His job mainly involved dressing in colourful ethnic costumes and showing tourists around the park. Sometimes guests would ask him to say something about his ethnic culture. They would ask him whether he could speak his ethnic language, Hani. Sometimes they would also ask Kai to sing ethnic songs for them. In many cases, Kai had his answers prepared, because all the tourist guides were given a tourism manual providing instruction about how to respond to guests' questions regarding ethnic minority culture in general in Yunnan.

7 "Xi's Yunnan visit highlights poverty elimination, ethnic solidarity," *Xinhua*, 22 January 2015, <http://en.people.cn/n/2015/0122/c90785-8839247.html>. Accessed 20 January 2022.

8 All pseudonyms.

9 Mao 2020; 2021.

10 See similar observation by Kendall 2019.

Sometimes, Kai would feel embarrassed when encountering such requests and questions from tourists, since he knew little about Hani culture and customs outside the tourist manual:

Hani should be an important identity for me. However, I don't feel that I am an authentic Hani. When I get home, my parents sometimes speak Hani, and I don't understand. I don't know what are the major festivals that Hani should celebrate. I don't know...I want to be a real Hani, but I don't think I can. My parents moved too early; I was only four at that time. (Kai, 21 years old, male, Hani, Tea Park)

Despite being officially registered as a Hani, Kai did not consider himself to be an "authentic" Hani person. His parents migrated away from their Hani village when he was very young. Growing up in a Han village, Kai felt that he had partly lost the connection with his ethnic origins.

Kai's ambivalence was shared by other informants who had doubts about the authenticity of their ethnic identities. Despite being officially registered as part of an ethnic minority and being of an ethnic minority by descent, many informants had conflicting understandings of and emotions regarding their ethnic identities. For convenience, I call these people "ascribed minorities," meaning that they felt their ethnic identities were more like something that had been ascribed to them from somewhere else – state recognition, family heritage, etc. – instead of something they really saw themselves to be. If their ethnic identities were not something that they could sit comfortably with, then what did such identities mean to them? More importantly, why did they think that they were not "authentic" ethnic minorities?

Insights were gained from informants' explanations of who they thought "authentic" minorities were. Below are two conversations I had with a performer named Mi and a chef named Chen, both of whom thought of themselves as ascribed ethnic minorities. As Mi said:

Mi: I am Hani because my mother is Hani. But I think I'm Hanified (*wo yijing bei Hanhua le* 我已经被汉化了)...because in fact I am not much different from the Han. Even from my mother's generation, they stopped speaking the Hani language. I can't even listen to Hani language and understand it. (Mi, 21 years old, female, Hani, Forest Park)

Chen reiterated these sentiments:

- Chen: I think it will be fruitless if you just keep trying to find ethnic minorities here [meaning in Waterfall Restaurant].
- Researcher: Why is that?
- Chen: Many of the ethnic minorities are inauthentic just like me.
- Researcher: I didn't know that you were ethnic minority!
- Chen: I am. I'm Yi. But...I don't think I am authentic Yi.
- Researcher: Why is that?
- Chen: I am authentic Yi by blood, but I know nothing about [being] Yi. I know nothing about Yi culture at all, and I don't understand the Yi language. My ancestors are all Yi though, my grandfathers from both my mother and my father's sides are Yi.
- Researcher: Can they speak or understand Yi?
- Chen: My father probably can understand Yi when other people are speaking, but he cannot speak Yi. But my grandfather's generation, they can both understand and speak Yi. (Chen, 32 years old, male, Yi, Waterfall Restaurant)

Mi's and Chen's views were echoed by many informants, who expressed that ethnic identity was not something that could be strictly defined, but was rather subject to their own definition. Many factors influenced how they understood and experienced such identities. For example, both informants

mentioned the roles of language and costume in shaping their sense of being ethnic. Some informants also mentioned their parents' migration, which brought them further away from the places where ethnic cultures are practised in villagers' everyday lives, such as in the story of Kai.

Like Mi, some of them also situated themselves against the backdrop of the "Hanification" (*Hanhua* 汉化) process, which they cited as a major reason for having stopped many practices in relation to ethnicity, beginning with their generation or even earlier. Hanification, or Han assimilation, refers to the process through which ethnic minorities become increasingly assimilated to the Han culture. It means that they increasingly adopt Han practices, such as speaking Mandarin rather than minority languages. It is related to the state's overarching ideology towards ethnic minorities in recent decades: *ronghe* 融合 (assimilation), which aims to assimilate minorities into the Han culture and eventually eliminate their cultural differences.¹¹ The state also uses "civilizing projects," such as education, with the aim of eliminating the supposed "backwardness" of ethnic minorities and enabling them to catch up with the Han.¹² While bilingual education has long been promoted in many parts of the PRC, this began to change in the 2000s.¹³ Increasingly, education for many minority children is intended to turn them into Chinese citizens, compelling them to choose between being Chinese and being ethnic minorities.¹⁴ In a sense, these informants' cases suggest that the project of Han assimilation has been successful. The younger generation of ethnic minorities growing up in the contemporary era have lost the close connection with their culture. They often defined the old people who remain in the village as "authentic" and advised me to find them there.

Although Hanification plays a significant role in explaining why some people stopped these ethnic practices and consequently lost their sense of attachment with their ethnic identities, this is not the only explanation. Informants' descriptions also highlight the important role of *practices* in their sense of being ethnic. For example, both Mi and Chen highlighted the importance of practices like speaking and understanding the language and having certain knowledge about one's own ethnic group. These practices are all important parts of one's ethnic belonging.

Ethnicity as "Doing" Rather Than "Being"

This echoes existing theory which regards ethnicity as practices rather than pre-existing qualities within people. Building on Bourdieu's theory of practice and habitus, Bentley proposes that by viewing ethnicity as practices which are shaped by habitus built upon shared experiences, this perspective could "provide an efficient means of explaining the conjunction of affect and instrumentality in the phenomenon of ethnicity."¹⁵ Like all other practices, the practices of ethnicity are not fully based in individuals' free will – practices are forms of habitus-informed doing.¹⁶

Despite providing useful insights, Bentley's approach of practices of ethnicity cannot be directly applied here. In the performers' cases, as ascribed minorities, even though they have stopped practising ethnicity because of their changing habitus, they still have to perform or to do ethnicity as part of their work as ethnic performers. For example, although Kai stopped practising ethnicity from a young age (the reason that he used to define himself as "inauthentic"), he still needed to "do ethnicity" in certain ways at work, as it was something that he must encounter every day. There was a set of normative cultural expectations that deeply shaped the ways that he practised ethnicity, rather than it being something formed out of habitus. Therefore, I take inspiration

11 See Hansen 1999; Ma 2007; Zang 2015.

12 Harrell 1995.

13 For an example of bilingual education in Yingjiang, Yunnan, see Wang 2011.

14 Hansen 1999; Yi 2005.

15 Bourdieu 1977; Bentley 1987, 28.

16 Bentley 1987.

from West and Zimmerman's (1987) "doing gender" approach to shed light on a new way of thinking of ethnicity as something people do rather than who they are.¹⁷

Instead of regarding gender as a fixed quality that exists within people, the "doing gender" approach sees gender as something people do. It is an outcome of men's and women's constant doing to live up to social norms regarding femininity and masculinity. To "do" gender is not always to live up to normative conceptions of femininity or masculinity; it is to engage in behaviour "at the risk of gender assessment."¹⁸ Similarly, there are existing normative cultural expectations regarding how people should do ethnicity in China – I call these sets of rules and expectations "ethnic scripts." People are subject to "ethnic assessment," in the sense that they are expected to do ethnicity in a way that is in accordance with cultural norms.¹⁹ This is particularly salient for ethnic performers, who have to encounter ethnicity on a daily basis. The concept of ethnic scripts can illuminate performers' experiences of doing ethnicity, both within and outside the work setting.

Multi-layered Ethnic Scripts in Contemporary China

In seeing ethnicity as something people do, it is important to note that such practices do not exist in a vacuum, as they are informed by existing representations, common knowledge and cultural expectations of ethnicity, which all form the "ethnic script." The "ethnic script" has been proposed as a theoretical concept in existing research by Lerner, Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder.²⁰ Drawing on script theory, the ethnic script is used to describe prescribed normative behaviour according to one's ethnicity – in this case, education is regarded as part of the ethnic script for Russian Jewish immigrants in Israel, who draw heavily on the ethnic script to understand who they are and draw ethnic group boundaries. Here, the collective meaning of the ethnic script is also highlighted, meaning that it is not only relevant in individual negotiations of ethnic identities, but also relevant in group identity politics.²¹

While Lerner, Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder's theory offers a theory to explain how group boundaries are drawn by referring to ethnic scripts, their use of the "ethnic script" is more akin to ethnic stereotypes – in their case, how Russian Jewish people as an ethnic group always value education. One could reasonably argue that valuing education is more about "class" amongst Russian Jewish intellectuals, rather than an issue that is about ethnicity. Besides, the ethnic script is mainly approached as something individuals use to make sense of a new social environment. Less talked about is how ethnic scripts can be influential in shaping people's behaviours. Further, the ethnic script is approached as a singular matter, while in fact there can be multiple scripts existing simultaneously in defining normative cultural assumptions about the meaning of ethnicity.

Therefore, my use of "ethnic scripts" departs from Lerner, Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder's theory on these points, and I will put more emphasis on how China's context shapes the meaning of ethnic scripts. To be more specific, my use of "scripts" is closer to the "cultural scenarios" dimension of the script, which Simon and Gagnon adopt to discuss "sexual scripts."²² "Cultural scenarios," in their theorization of sexuality, are the "cultural narratives constructed around sexuality" that are available for individuals to draw on to make sense of sexuality.²³ Similarly, my definition of ethnic scripts refers to the cultural repertoires of ethnicity, which largely inform people's practices and understandings of ethnicity. There is existing literature which implies that individuals in China make sense of their ethnic identity in relation to the state's representations of ethnicity, although they

17 West and Zimmerman 1987.

18 Ibid., 136.

19 Mao 2021.

20 Lerner, Rapoport and Lomsky-Feder 2007.

21 Ibid.

22 Gagnon and Simon 1973; Simon and Gagnon 1986.

23 Jackson and Scott 2010, 816.

do not use the term “ethnic scripts,” nor do they systematically analyse it. By using the concept of ethnic scripts, I aim to make more explicit the ways that existing cultural scenarios shape individuals’ understandings and practices of ethnicity. As the meaning of a script is a tool that tells people how to act, scripts reveal the connections between representations and everyday lives. How, then, do ethnic scripts inform performers’ ways of doing ethnicity? To answer this question, it is first necessary to briefly explore what the cultural repertoires are and what they say about ethnic minority people in general in China’s context. The multi-layered ethnic scripts will be explained in relation to existing literatures about the discourses and cultural representations of ethnicity in China. Meanwhile, as ethnic scripts clearly shape the ways ethnic performances are designed and further shape the interaction between guests and performers, I will use ethnic performance as an example to illustrate the meaning of ethnic scripts.

The first layer of ethnic performers’ ethnic scripts is the binary distinction between the Han and ethnic minorities, which is a recurrent theme in the literature about the cultural representation of ethnicity in China. While ethnic minority people are portrayed as “the other,” the peripheral and the exotic, such representations reaffirm position of the Han as normative, dominant and even un-ethnic.²⁴ It could be said that it is performers’ otherness, or their ability to perform such otherness, that got them into their jobs in the first place.²⁵ Hence, in a sense, for ethnic performers, to do ethnicity at work is to keep performing such differences and otherness. Substantial bodily and emotional work are involved in performing the “othered” minorities in society.

Second, in contemporary Han culture, ethnic minority people are also regarded as backward and primitive, and associated with the past.²⁶ Such representations of ethnic minorities share a resemblance with discourses about rural people in China, which also depict rurality as opposed to modernity.²⁷ In fact, being ethnic and being rural are closely related. That is also the reason that people often suggested that I look for “authentic” minority people in the remote mountainous rural areas. This was because ethnic minority people are imagined to be pure and simple, uncontaminated by modern ways of living. In Forest Park, ethnic performance was incorporated into the natural forest setting, with wild animals living in a park being an attraction for tourists. The dances that performers perform on stage told stories about the “past,” such as one about how the Wa used to rely on hunting animals for a living before the socialist regime. In that dance, female performers wore grass skirts and their male counterparts wore only shorts. With long sticks in their hands, they imitated primitive people trying to hunt tigers for a meal. The primitiveness and backwardness of ethnic minority people that was portrayed through the performance further reproduced their otherness and exoticism.

Another important layer of ethnic scripts is the portrayal of minority women as erotic and subject to different sexual standards.²⁸ This is particularly true for minority women in South-West China. For example, for the Mosuo in Yunnan, the popular perception of minority women as being sexually promiscuous and available has been mobilized by the market to promote ethnic tourism.²⁹ Before guests set foot in a Mosuo tourist destination, they already expect to experience the erotic culture of Mosuo; this has put a lot of pressure on women from the local area, regardless of whether or not they participate in the tourism industry. In this research, such gendered and sexualized ethnic scripts shape performers’ work in various ways, as will be demonstrated later.

There are certainly other aspects of ethnic scripts which cannot be summarized in an exhaustive manner here. Just as sexual scripts are multi-dimensional and constantly changing, ethnic scripts also never remain static and unchanged. It is crucial to point out how ethnic scripts are

24 Gladney 1994; Harrell 1995; Schein 2000; Leibold 2010.

25 Schein 2006.

26 Harrell 1995.

27 See Cohen 1993.

28 Schein 2000; Walsh 2005.

29 Walsh 2005.

clearly guided and shaped by the state's current *ronghe* ideology, which aims to assimilate minority cultures and lifestyles to the Han culture, yet still continue to carry a few markers (e.g. songs and dances) in order to uphold the image of China as a unified nation with colourful ethnic cultures.³⁰ The seemingly paradoxical efforts to preserve ethnic cultures and promote their assimilation are not necessarily in contradiction with each other, since states can achieve "a Han-centric vision of Chinese modernization" by promoting ethnic cultures in state-sponsored ways.³¹

In China's context, ethnic scripts are heavily promoted by the state – this leads to differential judgments of ethnic practices as well. Some ethnic practices are deemed to be good and are thus distinguished for promotion and protection. Other practices, meanwhile, are regarded as bad, feudal and superstitious, and thus their elimination is deemed necessary.³² There are also other ethnic practices that are deemed dangerous, as they are associated with national separatism. For example, many ethnic groups in China have religious backgrounds, and some of their religious practices, especially those that exist in relation to trans-national religions, are deemed dangerous and a potential risk to national unity. During my fieldwork, I accompanied one of my informants to her home village during Spring Festival. It was a Lahu village with Christian traditions. I observed a scene wherein a village official was complaining about how the local priest was secretly distributing religious materials from Myanmar, the border of which is just several miles from this village. Since there is a group of Lahu in Myanmar, with whom Lahu people in Yunnan border may have more cultural proximity than with the Han, their interactions were under close surveillance by the local government. When a conversation I was having with another local official shifted to the topic of religion, he suddenly refused to continue the conversation. Being aware that I was studying in a foreign university, this local official refused to discuss "sensitive" topics with me. However, from his responses, it was clear that certain ethnic practices were not deemed to be as harmless as others.

Another issue that needs to be considered is whether there is an ethnic script for each distinct group. Without denying that each minority group might have their own distinct script, ethnic scripts provide an overwhelmingly hegemonic depiction of ethnic minorities in general in China. Under such hegemonic depiction, the distinct ethnic group disappears and is replaced by the umbrella term "ethnic minorities" (*shaoshu minzu* 少数民族). This means that ethnic minority groups are largely treated as homogeneous, despite their different cultures and traditions.

Nonetheless, there are multiple ethnic scripts that do not always give clear and coherent messages about ethnicity in China. There are ethnic scripts which are clearly endorsed by the state (e.g. state discourses such as "eliminate poverty, and not let one ethnic brother or sister be left behind"), and others which are promoted by the market to gain profits (e.g. market advertisements such as "be ready to be welcomed by our most hospitable and pure ethnic minority people"). Often these different dimensions of ethnic scripts coexist, and it is difficult to distinguish which one is the government's version or the market version. Therefore, ethnic scripts originate from different sites, while the local variants which are from different sources add other layers to them. In other words, ethnic scripts are multi-layered, sometimes may conflict with each other, and can be mobilized in different contexts in different ways.

Furthermore, the ethnic scripts that are discussed in this article cannot be generalized across time and space without carefully considering historical changes and regional differences. As Emily Wilcox helpfully reminds us, minority dancers in the early PRC era were represented and understood drastically differently from how they were after the 1980s. Rather than being represented as primitive, backward, erotic and exotic, minority dancers were regarded as the embodiment of civility and progressiveness, as an active vanguard of China's unity amid the external threat of

30 Ma 2007; Zang 2015.

31 McCarthy 2011, 10.

32 For example, McCarthy 2011; Zang 2015.

US imperialism at that time.³³ Besides recognizing their temporal dimensions, it is also important to note that ethnic scripts discussed in this article mainly apply to ethnic minorities in South-West China, and Yunnan province in particular, which tends to be seen as a peaceful region in which ethnic conflicts and controversies are relatively limited. Therefore, the ethnic scripts that are described here may not apply to other contexts such as Xinjiang or Tibet. While the idea of ethnic scripts may be employed in different contexts, it is important to recognize the local dimension of ethnic scripts, and to understand them in contextualized ways.

Ethnic Scripts at Work

Ethnic performance is not designed in a vacuum. Rather, it is a site where ethnic scripts are enacted and lived through performers' everyday lives, deeply shaping not only the ways in which performers' work is designed and their interactions with guests, but also their lives outside of work. This section uses performers' work as an example to showcase the myriad ways in which ethnic scripts are at work. They shape the ways in which people understand and practise ethnicity, and work through individuals in the most microscopic and intimate ways, including shaping their emotions and sense of self in gendered ways.

Ethnic scripts as "feeling rules"

At work, ethnic performers are subject to "feeling rules,"³⁴ which largely intersect with ethnic scripts. According to the ethnic scripts at play here, ethnic minority people are expected to be passionate, happy and welcoming to guests. This is compounded by the emotional labour³⁵ that migrant performers are expected to do as service workers, making it even more important to project the image of happy and cheerful minorities who are naturally hospitable to guests. Although happiness as a state project has been well documented in China,³⁶ meaning that all people are expected to constantly show their happiness, ethnic scripts added another layer to the emotional labour that ethnic performers are expected to do at work. It might be problematic or even dangerous for them to not show their happiness, as it might imply an orientation towards national separatism. For instance, one popular song named "Happy Lahu" (*Kuaile lahu* 快乐拉祜) expresses the happiness of the Lahu people living a good life under the CCP regime, compared to the miserable lives that they were living before the CCP "liberated" them. Borrowing Ahmed's words, the "happiness duty" becomes a moral obligation for performers to speak about happiness and be silent about their unhappiness.³⁷

Simultaneously, the undertaking of a duty of happiness makes migrant performers valuable subjects under the commercialization of ethnicity. Performers' happiness becomes a tourist attraction, as many tourists expect to meet happy minorities whose happiness is "uncontaminated by modern ways of living."³⁸ Ethnic minority people tend to be portrayed as worry-free and easily contented by limited material conditions. There is a local saying that is used to describe Lahu people, which was frequently used in scripts for ethnic performance – "[Lahu people] sing once they are full, they dance as long as they have drunk enough wine." This implies that Lahu people do not need to worry about tomorrow. There is also a negative connotation attached to the saying, which suggests that Lahu people are without foresight and lazy. It is also often used to justify the Lahu's disproportionate vulnerability to poverty. In the ethnic tourism context, sayings like this are often utilized to

33 Wilcox 2016.

34 Hochschild 1979.

35 Ibid.

36 See Yang 2014; Wielander and Hird 2018.

37 Ahmed 2010; Mao 2021.

38 For example, Harrell 1995; Walsh and Swain 2004; Mao 2021.

showcase the exoticism of ethnic minorities who are subject to different feeling rules as compared to the Han.

The emotion work that migrant performers undertake also requires them to endure prejudices against minority people at work. They have to regulate their feelings about potential discrimination and prejudice. The stereotypes and discrimination associated with ethnicity manifest themselves in the performers' daily working lives. It usually means that the workers have to do extra emotion work to cope with the biases and stereotypes that are projected onto them. For example, there were guests who assumed that ethnic performers were so backward that they had never watched television before. In situations like this, performers need to do extra emotion work to regulate their own emotional expressions in relation to tourists' discriminatory remarks.

Ethnic scripts can be used to understand some informants' ambivalence about whether or not they are "authentic" minorities. While people may draw heavily on existing ethnic scripts to make sense of their ethnicity, there is a large gap between everyday practices of ethnicity and ethnic scripts. It is ironic that sometimes ethnic scripts override people's everyday experiences of ethnicity and become the "authentic" ones. For example, I was initially surprised when I found that performers were not very critical of existing ethnic scripts, most of which describe ethnic minority people in essentialized ways. For example, there were some introductory lines that the host had to say before each performance started, which were mostly about the characteristics of certain minority groups, which were then reflected in the songs or dances that followed the introductory lines. Such introductory lines were highly similar to the textbook versions of introductions to ethnic minorities in China, which provide an essentialized understanding of ethnic minority people. According to such depictions, for example, Wa people are regarded as bold and unrestrained, while Dai people are thought to be gentle and attentive. I was surprised that most informants agreed with such scripts and referred to them when they were talking about their understandings of ethnic groups. However, later I realized that this shows exactly the ways in which ethnic scripts work. In other words, this shows how powerful the impact of ethnic scripts is, wherein people starting to define ethnicity in relation to what has been prescribed rather than their real-life experiences. Therefore, ethnic scripts also play a crucial role in shaping performers' sense of self, and sometimes, ironically, encourage them to work on the ethnic self in ways that resonate with what has been depicted by ethnic scripts.

Ethnic scripts in shaping the "project of the self"

Contrary to ethnic scripts' depiction of ethnic minority people as naturally good at singing and dancing, many performers that I encountered in this research only started performing ethnic songs and playing ethnic instruments for the sake of the job, including those who were "authentic" ethnic minorities. More interestingly, they regarded mastering the skills of ethnic song and dance as a good way to potentially achieve upward social mobility. In other words, under the context of the increasing commercialization of ethnicity, performers work on their ethnic selves in ways promoted by the ethnic scripts, with the hope that they will be more valuable in the market.

Wei was a young performer at Tea Park. Having grown up in a Lahu village, Wei thought of himself as an authentic Lahu. However, in order to get a job as an ethnic performer, Wei still needed to learn from scratch how to project the image of an "authentic" ethnic minority. According to ethnic scripts, ethnic minorities are naturally good at singing and dancing. Therefore, Wei had to learn to sing ethnic songs and play the accompanying instruments, even though he had "never touched a guitar before." Nevertheless, his friend's successful story of finding a job as an ethnic performer inspired him, and he decided to give it a go. He started to practise guitar at home and learnt some ethnic songs by himself. This training continued after he got the job at Tea Park. Although Wei personally preferred singing popular songs, he intentionally spent more time practising ethnic songs, being aware that this is what was popular among tourists.

Wei's story points to the gap between ethnic scripts and people's real experiences of ethnicity. Here, again, what ethnic scripts depict as "authentic" overrode Wei's own experiences and became the "authentic" that was recognized by the market and the state. Cultivating the necessary skills to become an ethnic performer is also about learning to construct the self-image which is in accordance with what has been prescribed by ethnic scripts. Such sentiments of cultivating skills and working on the ethnic self are common among performers, many of whom are compelled to learn more about ethnic culture and performance skills with the hope of economic advancement. In the local context of the commercialization of ethnic culture, working on the ethnic self also means to embrace the local ethnic scripts which emphasizes "promoting ethnic culture," and ties this closely with poverty alleviation and economic development.

Researcher: How did you decide to learn guitar and sing ethnic songs? Did you know these things before?

Lang: No, I didn't know how to play guitar, nor did I know how to sing these songs...But I love doing these things. They are so much easier to do than construction work...[as an ethnic performer] your mouth and your guitar are your rice bowl...And my dream is to promote ethnic culture, so that wherever I go, people would know that I'm a Lahu. If we do it well, when our generation gets old, our kids can still benefit from it. They will have a better life than us...They wouldn't need to migrate to find jobs anymore... (Lang, 27 years old, male, Lahu, Forest Park)

Lang used to be a construction worker before he embarked on the journey of becoming an ethnic performer. Compared to the hard work of construction work, he obviously preferred his current job. Similar to Wei, Lang also needed to learn how to "be ethnic" in ways which fit the ethnic scripts, despite the fact that he is an "authentic" Lahu who grew up in a Lahu village. The local context also meant that "promoting ethnic culture" had become part of the local ethnic scripts. This added new meaning to the work that Lang was doing. For him, cultivating his skills as a performer meant something bigger than just the job. It was also a chance to promote and preserve ethnic cultures, and even benefit younger generations of ethnic minorities, so that they could avoid the fate of having to migrate for work.³⁹ For performers who have limited resources, this is also regarded as one of the few trajectories through which they could aspire for economic gains and "success."⁴⁰ Although it is mostly men who tend to work on their ethnic selves and foster their talents with the hope of future gains, as they are less likely to be sexualized in the same way as their female counterparts (see the following subsection).

However, this does not mean that performers wholeheartedly embrace the existing ethnic scripts and work on the ethnic self with no ambivalence. In a way, to keep working on one's ethnic self is also to keep one's otherness and exoticism in order to capitalize on one's ethnicity in the context of commercialization. Ethnicity is only valued in the work setting – in which ethnicity has become a valuable asset – but not outside of it. In my fieldwork, I observed how performers tended to change out of their ethnic costumes right away after work, even though there was only a short walk from their workplace to where they lived. This suggests their desire to disassociate themselves from certain workplace ethnic scripts, and even the potential desire to "pass" as Han outside the workplace.

These ambivalences point to the complex and even conflicting ways in which ethnic scripts work. On the one hand, through working on the ethnic self in a way that fits the ethnic scripts desired by the state and market, some performers gained economic advancement and chances of self-development. They closely aligned their "enterprising self" with official rhetoric, such as promoting ethnic cultures, boosting local economic development, etc. Through framing ethnic

39 Such sentiments of developing ethnic tourism to avoid migration have been discussed in existing work. For example, Chio 2014.

40 Mao 2021.

performance in such ways, they tried to incorporate themselves into the “dominant systems of value.”⁴¹ On the other hand, performers experienced marginalization and otherness both within and outside of work settings, especially when ethnic scripts emphasized the backwardness and otherness of ethnic minorities. Therefore, as soon as they were off work, performers strived to “pass” as Han rather than proudly embracing their ethnic selves.

This highlights ethnic performers’ agency in “doing ethnicity” in ways that maximize their own benefit. They actively embrace the aspects of ethnic scripts which could benefit themselves, while consciously keeping a distance from the more constraining aspects of ethnic scripts.⁴² Rather than remaining static, this points to the potential for ethnic scripts to keep changing, as migrant performers and ethnic minority people themselves are also active actors in the production and reproduction of ethnic scripts.

Gendered ethnic scripts

Ethnic scripts are inherently gendered, and tend to sexualize ethnic minority women, especially in the context of South-West China. The portrayal of minority women as exotic and erotic has been extensively discussed in academic work.⁴³ Minority women are socially constructed as more sexually open on the grounds that they are not subjected to the same moral code that constrains Han women’s sexuality.⁴⁴ Such eroticized representations can be related to the image of minority women as sexually dangerous and mysterious; for example, Miao women are believed to have the ability to use “*gu*” 蛊 – sorcery to win their loved one’s favour.⁴⁵ In this case, regardless of whether performers are authentic minority people, when they dress up as, and perform as, ethnic minorities, they are subjected to further sexualization. This is not to suggest that eroticization only applies to ethnic minority women. Numerous studies have highlighted how Han women are also subject to sexualization in entertainment settings, such as hostesses working at karaoke bars, or even white-collar women in banquet settings.⁴⁶ However, as Otis’s work on hotel workers in Beijing and Kunming shows, female service workers are more prone to being sexualized in settings where they are believed to be associated with ethnic tourism.⁴⁷ Ethnic scripts add yet another layer to the eroticization that female ethnic performers find themselves in.

The work settings and contents of ethnic performances are all designed according to the ethnic scripts which eroticize minority women. In Waterfall Restaurant, there were multiple pictures hanging on the walls showing images of minority women dressed in revealing clothes, some of them bathing under waterfalls. In Forest Park, a typical *bancan* starts with the introductory lines from the host, which often involve jokes to create a fun and relaxing atmosphere. For example, they depict minority people as passionate and quick to fall in love with other people. The songs and dances that are performed are mainly about the romantic relationships of ethnic minority people, of which the usual image is of a young woman who has fallen in love and is waiting for her lover’s visit. Moreover, the toasting rituals during *bancan* involve performers massaging guests’ shoulders while toasting and having cross-cupped wine with guests;⁴⁸ sometimes female performers are expected to sit on male guests’ laps while toasting in the VIP rooms of Forest Park. I have argued

41 Skeggs 2011.

42 Mao 2021.

43 For example, Gladney 1994; Schein 2000; Walsh 2005; Otis 2011.

44 Gladney 1994.

45 Schein 2000.

46 Zheng 2007; Liu 2016.

47 Otis 2011.

48 This involves the two people linking arms to drink the wine from their own cups, which is a ritual in traditional Chinese weddings that symbolizes the bride and groom’s bonding.

elsewhere that such performance of special rituals is a form of “distinction work,”⁴⁹ which is largely reliant on female performers’ sexualized labour to reaffirm VIP guests’ distinction and privilege.⁵⁰ It is also a ritual that made many female performers uncomfortable, and they voiced their concerns to me during interviews. Some of them chose to not disclose this part of their work with their family and friends; some of them faced relationship conflicts with their partners; and most of them were very aware of the stigma attached to undertaking sexualized labour in China.⁵¹ They often felt that they were required to perform scripts that conflicted with ideas of respectability in their personal lives. Ironically, while ethnic scripts sexualize minority women, some women performers refer to certain aspects of ethnic scripts to try to legitimize and desexualize their labour:

There’s nothing wrong with rubbing guests’ shoulders, I think. It’s part of our local ethnic culture, and the whole toasting process is to show hospitality to the guests – as is often practised in real minority villages. (Mei, 30 years old, female, Han, Waterfall Restaurant)

Mei’s reflections reveal how different aspects of ethnic scripts are referred to in this particular context. On the one hand, ethnic scripts heavily sexualize minority women in South-West China, which has deeply shaped the ways in which ethnic performers work. On the other hand, women performers refer to the aspect of ethnic scripts which depicts minority people as pure and simple to reframe the toasting ritual as ethnic minority people showing their hospitality to guests. The aspect of ethnic scripts also emphasizes how ethnic minorities are happy and passionate, with the hope of minimizing the stigma attached to undertaking sexualized labour.

Besides, as the development of ethnic culture has been so tightly linked with local economic development, the local ethnic scripts encourage individuals to broadcast their ethnic culture, and even to actively commodify their ethnicity. Therefore, promoting local ethnic culture, again, is being used to give legitimacy to the labour. With the public endorsement of “promoting ethnic culture,” the political endorsement of ethnic performance has enabled performers to maintain a sense of respectability, and to mobilize certain aspects of ethnic scripts to legitimate and give significance to their labour.

This again points to the multi-layered meaning of ethnic scripts. It shows how ethnic scripts can not only be constraining and repressive, but also can empower people when used in certain ways. As a result, women performers constantly struggle with different versions of ethnic scripts, which may be in conflict with each other, and provide different meanings regarding being “good” women and being “good” ethnic minorities. This reveals the multi-dimensional nature of ethnic scripts, and therefore the need for them to be understood in relation to their specific contexts.

Conclusion

This article proposes the concept of “ethnic scripts” to understand ethnicity as something people do, as well as the ways in which broader social and cultural repertoires shape people’s ways of doing ethnicity. It demonstrates how ethnic minority individuals in China have diverse relationships to politically and commercially endorsed ethnic scripts, which are neither wholly positive or negative but instead shape the practices of ethnicity itself. Individuals position themselves differently in relation to these socially constructed prescriptive notions of ethnicity. Their different interactions with ethnic scripts lead to different results, showcasing the complexity of people’s relationship to the diverse practices of ethnicity.

49 Hanser 2008.

50 Mao 2021.

51 See Liu 2016.

Feeling “inauthentic” as an ethnic minority is not a private concern, but a public issue. Yet it has not been taken seriously by existing literature on the politics of ethnicity in contemporary China. What is missing from the common knowledge or stereotypical imaginings is how young people who are of an ethnic minority background according to their official registration status, but who may not feel very strongly attached to their ethnic identity, make sense of it. A shift of perspective from ethnicity as “being” to ethnicity as “doing” enables us to understand this ambivalence. This uses the perspective of doing ethnicity as a refusal to see ethnicity in an essentialized way. It recognizes that while the state’s identification of ethnicity is fixed and rigid, individuals’ identifications are fluid and constantly under negotiation.⁵² From this perspective, some performers feel “inauthentic” because they stopped certain practices of ethnicity of which they regarded crucial, e.g. speaking the language or having the cultural knowledge about one’s ethnicity. More importantly, sometimes ethnic scripts override their own experience to become the “authentic” one.

Ethnic scripts in China are heavily state supported and provide an essentialized and homogeneous understanding of what being ethnic means. According to these scripts, the modern, urban Han are distinguished from the backward, rural minorities. The scripts also eroticize minority women, particularly under the influence of the market, which impacts on how women do ethnicity in the work context of ethnic performance. In a way, ethnic scripts form feeling rules, which shape how performers do emotion work within and outside of the work context. Sometimes multi-layered or even contradictory messages are given by these ethnic scripts, as they are being used in different ways by different actors in specific contexts. This article also explores the ways that ethnic scripts are closely related to migrant performers’ emotions and sense of self, and the fact that ethnic scripts are inherently gendered. Ethnic scripts will not remain static, as ethnic minority people themselves are actively participating in the construction and reproduction of ethnic scripts. Future studies should further look at ethnic scripts beyond the context of South-West China and examine whether this concept could benefit our understanding of ethnicity more broadly.

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⁵² Leibold 2010.

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Jingyu Mao is a postdoctoral research fellow at Bielefeld University's Sociology Faculty. She received a PhD in Sociology from Edinburgh University. Her current research interests include migration and work, ethnicity and gender, emotion and intimacy, and the politics of care.