

“‘Miao’ Imagery in Chinese Ethnic Tourism: ‘Happy Minorities’ and Harsh Realities”

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Abstract

Domestic tourism in China supports campaigns to maintain a national narrative of ethnic harmony. As a counter-narrative, we describe our personal encounters with Miao people and the challenges that they face in modern society.

Methodology

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in China between 2014 and 2018, including one-to-one conversations with village residents, local entrepreneurs and university students.

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Introduction

When the People’s Republic of China was founded in 1949, the government decided that over 200 ethnic minority groups should be reclassified into 55 groups as part of building national identity. While “Miao” officially exists as one minority group, it actually includes four distinct sub-groups – Hmong, Hmu, Qo Xiong and A-Hmao – with diverse cultures, languages and histories. While the Chinese government classifies nine million people as “Miao,” research has shown that at least three million of these people self-identify as “Hmong,” a group which does not officially exist.

Results

Domestic tourism in China today is fueled by Han desire to experience minority cultures through “authentic” yet pre-packaged rural excursions. Its success has been supported by government campaigns to develop rural economies, showcase “peasant family happiness” in the countryside, and reinforce a national narrative of multi-ethnic harmony. Domestic tourism brings in more than 80 billion US per year; foreign tourism brings in less than half that amount. Guizhou in 2017 attracted 744 million tourists, predominantly Han Chinese. Who benefits the most from this industry is an open question.

The Chinese government supports the production of documentaries presenting Miao people as simple, close to the land and so unchanging in their culture that they appear mystical to outsiders. In the “Golden Pheasant Dance of Miao People” (2015), viewers hear that “From the drum beats, dancing gaits and costumes, you can find the traces of primitive worship of the Miaos.” In “Xijiang: The Miao Village of 1000 Households” (2013), viewers are told that “Xijiang is a relic of a time gone by preserved for millennia and exemplifying a world where human and nature live in harmony together...a living fossil of the Miao people’s history and culture.” Wherever they appear in social media, Miao people seem to be admirably removed from the worries of modern life. In fact, ethnic minorities are described in many Chinese guidebooks and popular travel blogs as “people born to sing and dance.” Many local people are keenly aware of performing a pre-packaged identity for outsiders. As one village chief says, “These performances aren’t real Miao culture. People just want the entertainment” (Hunt, 2013), even when featured performers often are professionals hired from the outside to pass as ethnic minorities (Wong 2010, Huang 2014).

One of the most promising developments to us is that college-educated minorities in China are now making the effort to reclaim, preserve and promote their culture. In the experience of Yang Shengwen, a Hmong university student, “modern education [in China] tells us that traditions handed down to us by our ancestors are just superstitions” (Yan, 2013). He is determined to make other students “see the gravity of the situation – that our indigenous culture is vanishing at an alarming pace” (Yan, 2013). For that reason, in Guizhou he leads fellow anthropology students on trips to interview Hmong elders, shamans, musicians and other cultural practitioners about the knowledge which should be passed down to future generations. As another young man emphasizes: “I am Miao by virtue of being born in China, but I am always Hmong by family and culture.”

Background

During the domestic tourism boom of the past ten years, urban Han from prosperous cities such as Shanghai have been visiting ethnically diverse rural areas such as Guizhou, advertised as a “timeless” realm of mountains and lamp-lit villages, where travelers can experience Miao hospitality. Our research shows that Miao people actually are confronting high rates of poverty and low rates of education. While they are being praised for “authentic” performances, they may be losing the culture which they are assumed to embody.

Research Questions

1. How is popular imagery of ethnic minority in China being constructed and circulated by groups with possibly competing interests?
2. How are concepts of authenticity embedded in the imagery promoted by such groups?

Conclusion

The benefits of ethnic tourism can potentially change village life for the better. Village entrepreneurs can gain agency in linking local and regional economies. As local employment increases, more families can stay together. Ideally, cross-cultural encounters can bridge long-standing differences between Han Chinese and ethnic minorities. However, profits tend to go to Han business networks. Shows tend to be managed by Han who also take leading roles in the cast. Overall, ethnic tourism is making it increasingly difficult for insiders as well as outsiders to tell what is “authentic” in “Miao” culture.

Images



(Kaili, China, photos by authors)



Changes in the Portrait Photography in the Social Media era

A Comparison of the Portraits of two U.S. Presidents before and after the advent of the Social Media

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• **Introduction :** Based on the measurement tools of digital popularity, one of the most popular photos of the most popular American President in the social media era, Barack Obama, is a selfie photograph of him! This is definitely not the kind of photography we expect from a US President to have, according to our experience of the thousands of US presidential photos printed in the 20th century media. What changes in communication, culture and technology have occurred in the social media era that led to this kind of photographic portrayal?

• **Abstract :** The purpose of this paper is to trace the evolution of portrait in the era of social networking, mainly on instagram, and define the role of the latter, if any, in terms of photographic techniques, style and modes of expression. In what way the form and content of photography have been shaped in the last decade based on the needs of the viewers/users? The most famous portraits of two US presidents William Clinton and Barack Obama before and after the advent of social media will be used as case studies.

• **Background / Relevance :** Portrait Photography is probably the most popular photographic genre in the photographic history. From the portraits in the 19th century studios to the mobile-phone selfies, the human portraits is a domain that has reflected the spirit of its time and is directly influenced by contemporary trends and aesthetics. The political portraits are by definition addressed to a mass audience and therefore correspond directly to their taste and expectations.

• **Research Question :** In what ways has portrait photography been affected by the changes in communication, culture and technology in the social media era?

• **Methodology :** The visual elements of the portraits will be analyzed on the basis of the theory of image modality by Kress and Leeuwen as well as issues of topic, concept and meaning. More specifically, there is a comparative study of the political portraits of William Clinton and Barack Obama in terms of lighting, angle, depth of field, colour etc. The selection of photographs of the two leaders of the Democrats that address to the same audience (voters of the Democrats), occur magazine covers -along with their election campaigns or not- press photos, official portraits for the White House as well as their instagram accounts, if any. Then, a socio-cultural analysis is developed as an explanation to the differences revealed.

• **Sample :**

1. **Official Presidential Portraits (White House, historical association) :** A comparative study of the virtual material is provided based on the official files of the White House (White House, historical association); on the one hand Bill Clinton's presidential painting portrait and on the other hand, Barack Obama's presidential photographic portrait. In fact, there has been a transition since 2009 and onwards regarding the use of photographic portraits instead of the use of painting portraits.

2. **Presidential portraits from magazine covers :** The photos selected are from the well-known American magazine "TIME" of 1993 and 2008. It is undoubted that the images from the "TIME" magazine are made by professional photographers who have ensured photographic quality, taking into consideration every aspect of techniques. In both cases, all photographic imaging elements have been organized in such a way so as to produce a competitive portrait in order to highlight some aspects of the personalities they depict.

3. **Presidential portraits from Presidential campaigns :** At this point, a comparison is made among three popular photos from the presidential election campaigns of the two Presidents as shown in the news of 1992 and 2008. While searching for Barack Obama's official profile on instagram, a number of new photo-news images were discovered depicting the President in various speeches and pre-election meetings. The comparison is also based on the image of President Obama which gathered most likes (88.582 / 11/10/2018) during the pre-election campaign season in 2012.

4. **Presidential portrait on instagram :** While studying the profile of Barack Obama on instagram, it is found that the most popular image (with the most likes) is this with his wife on his birthday as well as a selfie-style photography of him next to an anonymous US citizen. The subject of this study is focused on this selfie and this family portrait due to the remarkable concentration of likes on instagram (3.901.693 - 15/10/2018) and the comments of the people (comments 108.902) following Barack Obama. In any case, it should be emphasized that the text accompanying this photo contains the profile of Michelle Obama, who is more popular than the President on instagram. In addition, the third most popular photos of Barack Obama is a selfie photography of him (next to the ex-vice president Joe Biden) with approximately 3.181.383 likes.

• **Results :**

A close look at the two Official Presidential Portraits (White House, historical association) shows an absolute similarity in terms of the high quality of depiction; what is important is the recognition of the Presidents, a prerequisite for the archives of White House. By comparing the cover photos of the "TIME" magazine in two different seasons, the changes that have occurred over the years are evident, but not crucial; based on the method of modality, there is a low naturalistic depiction of Bill Clinton which makes the portrait even more artificial. However, both photos depict the Presidents as leaders with a vision for their country and personalities "greater than their voters". The Presidential portraits from the presidential/advertising campaigns in 1993 and 2008 are also pretty similar; however, the 2012 image of Obama is different (imitating the result of the popular filters of instagram) a fact that may be attributed to the influence of the social networks and accessibility to the digital filters of the applications for the mobile phones. Finally, as regards the Presidential portrait on instagram, the most liked photograph of the President portrays the Presidential couple and can be categorized as a commemorative photography since it depicts two members of a family. At first glance it seems that the form of the photo is plausible, but a closer look proves that this is not a snapshot, but an organized life-style photograph with a well made and careful digital processing that affects indirectly all the iconic elements of the image (color, brightness etc) so that the whole meaning is changed towards the tradition "we are one of you" (their voters).

• **Conclusion :**

In the 21st century, portrait photography has undergone an intense change. This research is triggered by the technological development of digital photography as well as the social media. What is important nowadays is the way photos are presented in social networks and the context of their analysis, since they are massively viewed and create a narrative form similar to the one in the old photo albums. Photographs on instagram remain eternally under viewing and may be judged anytime. This different reading makes the viewer to associate the images and therefore the photographic context is confused; they depict the events of the Presidents' lives not only in his political activity but also his personal and family life as well. The distinction between public and private life of the participants (in this case the US Presidents) in social networking tends to disappear. Also, the use of digital filters is now a common practice for anyone who takes photos for the instagram and therefore it is taken for granted that all photos shown on the social media have already been edited.

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• **Images :** (last access for all : 20/6/2019)

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Barack. Obama on instagram : <https://www.instagram.com/barackobama/?hl=el>



Sample 1



Sample 2



Sample 3



Sample 4



Context, Interpretation, and Content in Multimodal Texts

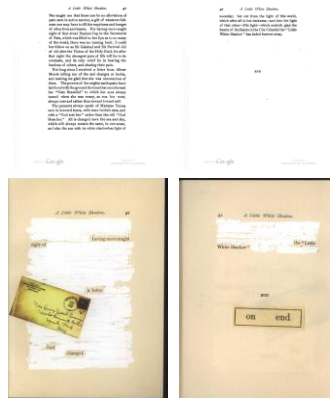
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Mary Ruefle explores the capacities of effacement in *A Little White Shadow* (2006), by showing her mark and creating a facsimile of the source text, which encourages the reader to more deeply consider her appropriative creation through the destruction of an older text.

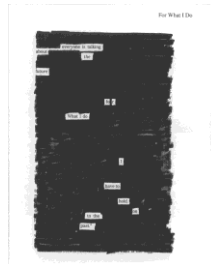
Emily Malbone
Morgan's
*A Little White
Shadow*



Mary Ruefle's
*A Little White
Shadow*

This allows the reader to not just be intellectually aware of the process of choice in creating the poem, but to see it. The visual presentation reminds us of the process of meaning making.

Newspaper Blackout, the 2010 book of poetry by Austin Kleon, shows how writing is already a choice among extant words and makes the poet's selection apparent through erasure of newspaper articles.



Kleon makes his choices apparent in *Newspaper Blackout* by explaining his process in the paratext, showing the visual aspect of the poems, and reflecting on this technique in several pieces. The element of active choice on the part of the writer begins to show how Kleon makes meaning rather than presenting or representing knowledge.

By focusing on the creative and destructive acts, the reader reconstructs choice and interpretation in the narrative. the narrative invites the reader to participate in its reconstruction, forcing active engagement that is aware of choice and interpretation in the narrative. Thus literature can combat anxiety of authenticity by using its status as art to aid the reader in understanding how to reconstruct this process.

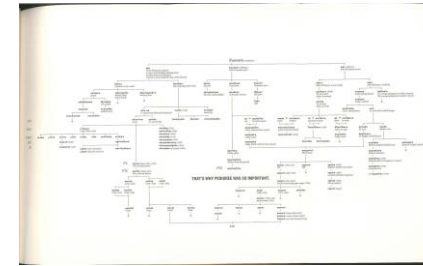
Abstract:

Literature and art have been playing with notions of authorship and authority for decades and forcing viewers and readers to consider subjectivity. In part, the nature of literature and art, which acknowledges its connection to individual perception, allows space to play with our notions of understanding. By making the process of creating a part of the work, whether visually in the final piece or the perception of how meaning is made by a character, it becomes clear the work itself is the result of choice and interpretation over observation. While there is space for the reader to question the truth in light of the instability presented in contemporary works, ultimately these narratives encourage skepticism towards the claim of objectivity and the obvious in favor of attention to every media production as a combination of interpretation and choice. Multimodal literature in particular tutors the reader in the processes of interpretation and creation by embracing visual and spatial elements. This poster will consider how multimodal texts play with images, language, and space to show the interplay of context, interpretation, and content in the reconstructive era in four texts: *Newspaper Blackout* by Austin Kleon, *A Little White Shadow* by Mary Ruefle, *VAS: An Opera in Flatland* by Steve Tomasula & Stephen Farrell, and *A Girl Imagined by Chance* by Lance Olsen.

For works cited and more information:



VAS: An Opera in Flatland allows Steve Tomasula and Stephen Farrell to consider language and the production of scientific understanding in a strongly multimodal text using both historical and contemporary information visualizations to draw attention to the ways "truth" can change over time.



Rather than leaving the connection of language to science in the images, the novel circles back to the always changing nature of language, science, and understanding and our part in creating knowledge. This reiterates that science needs an active reader to interpret; it is not just made known. Whether presented through language or image, it makes an argument for a particular understanding of the world through interpretation, not mere observation.

Lance Olsen manipulates and falsifies the photograph, the "message without a code" (Barthes *Responsibility* 5), in *A Girl Imagined by Chance* to show the importance of skepticism even with this supposedly "unmediated image" (Drucker 21).



The context of the language "anchors" interpretation. The image does not produce the same understanding as the words, and the picture becomes dominant in this relationship by providing the kernel of truth on which the lie is hung. Through editing, they make the photos mean what they want. Olsen's book combines metafiction and multimodality to encourage skepticism, but not rejection of understanding. By allowing the reader to reconstruct the process of deceiving others, the novel tutors the reader on understanding the importance of context rather than taking a photograph as "unmediated."

Strategies for Performative Walks

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Introduction

Walking can be thought of as a medium just like painting, printmaking or sculpture so the crucial question is: What happens once the walk commences? There would usually be a strategy employed when approaching the walk, unless the plan is to deliberately dispense with strategies. The strategy can involve observations and responses to the location the walk takes place within or, alternatively, can relate to discussions with fellow walkers or even communication with other participants walking simultaneously in remote locations. These communications, along with observations of the locale, can be transmitted and/or recorded to form an archive of the activity or even the basis for a future, related piece of work. Among the many documentary forms available, the ones illustrated below have spurned useful and stimulating results: a) Photography: Ad hoc or according to a pre-planned strategy, b) Videography: Recording actions/activities, c) Live-stream broadcast: Transmission of live action to remote audiences, d) Sound recording: Ambient/Environmental sounds, e) Social-media posts: Real-time or scheduled post updates, f) Colour collection: Cataloguing specific or ambient colours using dedicated apps. Each of these strategies are listed below, along with their application in relevant projects.

a) Photography

'Bus Trip to D1'



Allowing a time-based system to decide compositions. Strategy: Photographs were taken every 5 minutes from the left-hand side, rear window regardless of the scene.

b) Videography

'Tennis Ball Walk'



An investigation into urban terrain and surfaces. Strategy: A recorded walk through the local environment, bouncing a lime green tennis ball onto a variety of surfaces.

c) Live-stream Broadcast

'No holiday'



Participating in performance art festivals from remote locations. Strategy: Using internet-based software to broadcast a live-stream performance to audiences.

d) Sound Recording

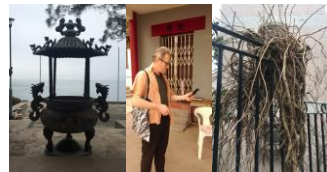
'City Centre'



Analysing the fringes of cities. Strategy: Walking away from and then toward the city centre, noticing the changes in signage and other details while recording the change in ambient sounds.

e) Social-media Posts

'Walk With Me'



Collaborative walking while thinking poetically. Strategy: Using live social media posts to communicate while walking simultaneously in multiple countries.

f) Colour Collection

'District 7 Strata'



Deferring decisions while creating a colour digital print. Strategy: Using a mobile app while walking to collect ambient colours and situate them into the composition of a digital print.

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