

Essay: The Yi and the Internet

Promoting Ethnicity and Ethnic Identity in Chinese Virtuality

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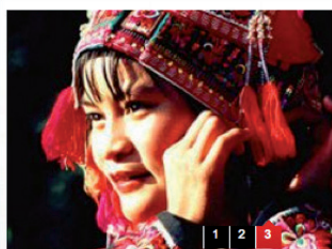
Abstract: Since the turn of the century China has witnessed an unparalleled development of internet sites, blogs, chat forums, and corresponding virtual communities. These virtual platforms have become important nodes for information and networking, especially in light of economic and intellectual migration and the corresponding trans-local quality of relationships and networks, and contribute to a further diversification of China's cultural landscape. China's ethnic minorities, too, have been employing internet platforms as a means to promote, and to reflect on, their own culture. For some groups these platforms signify an extension of early, non-virtual ethnic networks and platforms in urban contexts, which provide a renewed incentive for the affirmation of ethnicity/ethnic identity by engaging netizens in an ongoing dialogue on ethnic cultural contents, which transcends physical space. The article introduces two major internet platforms of the so-called Yi minority, www.yizuren.com and <http://yizucn.com>, and probes into their potential for ethnic identity promotion, and into general parameters of the relationship between the Yi and the internet.

Key words: China; Yi; ethnic minorities; internet; ethnic identity

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The past ten years have witnessed an unparalleled development of Chinese websites and chat forums via institutions (government and related organizations) as well as non-institutional incentives. Moreover, infotainment providers such as Sina.com and Sohu.com have created virtual networks and communities via their individualised blog platforms. Chat forums, most notably China QQ (tencent.com), which is by far the most popular chat room in China, have created extensive communication networks for their users via online chat and personalised user profile (for instance qzone.qq.com) functions.





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Ethnicity & Internet in China

This steadily increasing array of websites, chat forums, virtual game sites, blogs and microblogs plays an important role in informing and interconnecting internet users and public opinion. Also, these sites have contributed substantially to the remapping and forging of new, local and ethnic identities. (See also Giese 2006; Tamang 2008) These identities are not only virtual in content and format, but increasingly reflect back into concrete, and even new social contexts within Chinese society. One example for such a process of identity (re-affirmation) is the virtual presence of Chinese ethnic minorities on the internet. Ethnic minorities in particular have been making increased use of the different functions and options of Chinese virtual platforms and have thus moved from being (merely) 'represented' to playing an active vocal and visual role in mass media self-representation. The Yi minority has been part of this development.

From Yi urban community to virtual unity?

The so-called Yi ethnic minority ranks sixth in size among the officially recognized 55 ethnic minorities of the China (MOFCOM 2009), and demarcates a culturally and linguistically heterogeneous group, which consists of different branches that spread across the southwestern provinces of Yunnan, Guizhou, Sichuan and Guangxi. Diasporic communities of different Yi groups have been present in China's large urban city centers for over half a century now. As with other ethnic groups in Beijing, the Yi group consisted until the early 1990s almost exclusively of academic personnel and poli-

ticians. Many Yi students at the Minzu University of China (Zhongyang Minzu Daxue, formerly Central University for Nationalities (CUN), for example, were later absorbed into state institutions such as the Ethnic Affairs Commission and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Until the late 1990s the Beijing urban community was dominated by Yi groups from Yunnan. This is due to the size of the Yi group in Yunnan Province as well as to a larger degree of academic mobility than other branches, such as the Nuosu of Liangshan Prefecture in Sichuan Province.

Since 2004 Yi academic personnel/scholars from different parts of China have played an important, both direct and indirect (catalyst) role in the launching, proliferation and popularization of specific, Yi-geared websites and virtual networking tools. The Yi, though, were not the first ethnic minority to launch its own websites: . The Miao site Hmong in China/Miaozu/Hmoob (Sanmiaowang – Miaozu Lianhewang, <http://www.3miao.net/>), launched in 1999, was perhaps the earliest such site and may have even triggered all other, similar sites. Between 2002 and 2004 more and more ethnic groups started presenting themselves online. In the case of the Yi, institutions catering to ethnic minorities, such as Minzu University of China and the Southwest University for Nationalities (Xinan Minzu Daxue) in Chengdu have served as hotbeds for a generation of young academics, who initiated some of these web pages to satisfy their own need for information and to express themselves culturally. Young, educated Yi have been using these web platforms for the promo-

tion and discussion of their respective culture. Yet these websites are not merely the result of the general, rapid development of the Chinese internet. Like their makers, who originally emerged from the presence of Yi diasporic communities in large Chinese cities, Yi virtual platforms, are a direct extension, both culturally and financially, of earlier, urban and non-virtual networks and social events. The web site founders have received substantial in-kind and financial support from renowned members of the urban/translocal diaspora, including Yi (Nuosu) pop musicians such as Shanying Zuhe (Mountain Eagle), who fulfill an important function in cultural in-group cohesion, and Yi urban academia and political circles. Other Yi public figures, too, continue to fulfill an important function in the coordination of activities, which are linked to these sites, and which are geared towards the national promotion of Yi culture, and the dissemination of related information.

www.Yizuren.com

Despite a steady and fast increase in Yi-related websites, quite a few have proven to be short-lived. Reason for this is primarily lack of funding and issues concerning operation and management. There are quite a few Yi-related websites by now, few of which were founded on 'non-governmental' incentives, and few of which have survived due to financial and operational reasons. The oldest and most popular and persistent of these websites are, by far, www.yizuren.com and <http://yizucn.com>. Yizuren.com is the first and by far most comprehensive site for Yi people of and in China. The site was officially founded in 2004 but

has its beginnings as a private initiative of Huang Pingshan, an Yi from Shilin, Yunnan, in 2001. Huang was soon joined by Mao Fahu, an Yi from Yunnan's Chuxiong County, who had just graduated from the department for ethnic theory and policy at Minzu University of China, and who is now one of the major driving forces behind the site. As Mao related in interview with the author in Beijing in 2006, he came across Huang's site while searching the web for information on the Yi. Together, they began sourcing more information on the Yi of China beyond those of Shilin, to feed into a platform for the comprehensive promotion of greater Yi culture. Mao related in interview in Beijing in 2006 that it had been his and Huang's joint intention to create a platform by the Yi for the Yi. In January 2002 they added Yizuren.com's own chat platform, Yiren luntan. (<http://bbs.yizuren.com/>) to their site. (The Chinese bbs, lit. Bulletin Board System, is a virtual bulletin board format, which emerged in the mid-1990s and continues to enjoy great popularity among Chinese internet users for information exchange.) Their initiative soon gathered momentum, when more and more Yi from Beijing's Yi community, became aware and willing to contribute materials and funding for the maintenance of the site. Yizuren.com has since been continuously expanding, and has also witnessed several major makeovers. In 2004 Mao was joined by Pu Zhongliang, a Yunnan-Yi CASS (Chinese Academy of Social Sciences) scholar, who, like Mao,

is very active on behalf of Yi cultural promotion, both on- and offline

In its current format the website contains at least thirteen different major sections, which are all related to different aspects of Yi culture and community, and range all the way from 'people' to 'travel' to 'Yi studies' to 'music'. Each section contains articles, features, and photographs, which are inter- and cross-linked with other sections. Older entries are maintained after every makeover, so that users can refer back to older pieces, much like in an online archive. A central position on Yizuren's home page is reserved for its bbs forum. Many young urban Yi consider <http://bbs.yizuren.com/> to be the main Yi platform for information exchange and discussion.

The most recent remake has generally maintained the character of the original site but features a great plus in categories and topics. One of the most important and interesting features of the new website is the category of important Yi (or friends of the Yi) individuals, which presents excerpts from and in most cases also links directly to their blogs and/or websites. This feature reads like the 'who is who' in Yi circles (includes scholars, politicians, poets, etc.). This innovative section offers direct insights into the lives of ordinary and not so ordinary Yi and offers fans and interested readers a direct link to the blogs or websites of these individuals. This enhances, and motivates user traffic to and on these sites. Introductions and links to the blogs of the major Yi pop musicians, such

as Jike Qubu, direct fans to new songs and event details. The long-standing support of Yizuren.com through the Nuosu-Yi pop band Shanying Zuhe (Mountain Eagle) is also apparent in the individual link to a separate fan page hosted by Yizuren. Yi music, and pop music in particular, continues to play a vital role for Yi netizens. (Kraef 2005; 2012) Yizuren was the first Yi-related site of its kind to provide (contemporary) Yi musicians with a platform for self-promotion, which would later evolve into the launching of independent (and mainstream) artist blogs. (Ibid.) A special feature of Yizuren.com, which further points to the importance Yi pop music plays for Yi ethnic identity and cohesion is its own music site, Ethnic Audio, at <http://music.yizuren.com/>. (Ibid.)

Yizucn.com

In 2007 the popular Yi internet forum <http://yizucn.com/> ("The Chinese Yi's Net for Any Yi's People") was launched by young Yunnan Yi Suyue Feiyang, also a graduate of Minzu University of China (department for ethnic literature), as a "comprehensive work of ethnic culture" and to "impel ethnic cultural exchange and promote the further development of a 'harmonious society.'" (<http://hi.baidu.com/syfyang/blog/item/dc324b23c375e3519922ed79.html>. Last accessed November 22, 2012.) The popularity of this site among young Yi lies in its various applications, and in its separate chat forum (formerly <http://yizucn.com/bbs/>, now

Screenshot of www.Yizucn.com

<http://www.yizucn.com/forum.php>). Unlike the chat service QQ Yizucn.com/bbs does not only function according to groups but offers different sections, such as a separate chat forum for Yi music (<http://yizucn.com/bbs/index.php?gid=34>). Yizucn also offers a separate blog site at <http://blog.yizucn.com/>, where young users can entertain a custom-made blogspot. This feature provides more opportunities for personalisation and interaction (similar to QQ's qzone.com). Blog and bbs topics are interlinked.

Although Yizuren and Yizucn do not officially cooperate, and may in fact even compete in terms of chat forum user frequency and contents, they share many inter-personal and inter-topical connections. Also, a large percentage of young Yi users of both sites appears to be congruent. A recent comparison of daily fluctuation of both bbs sites illustrates a greater interest of netizens in Yizuren's chat forum. This may be due to its major expansion and revamp in 2009. Like Yizuren Yizucn launched an own music site, Yizucn Music (<http://www.yizucn.com/mp3/>), in 2010 (present format); this site can be accessed via a link in the top left corner of the Yizucn home page. Overall layout, design and content are much more simple than that of Yizuren's Ethnic Audio site and stand in stark contrast to the rather 'commercial' layout of the Yizucn home page. Much more developed are Yizucn's other special features, for ex. its microblog site, Yizucn Weibo (Chinese term for microblog) at <http://www.yizucn.com/t/> and its own video site at <http://www.yizucn.com/mv/>.

Yizuren and its operators and supporters cluster around the political and academic Yi urban diaspora in Beijing. Contents and layout adhere to its founders' original intention to create an information platform for all things Yi. This motivation is highlighted by the website's immediate vicinity to Minzu University; also, one of its current main operators is a CASS-scholar. Despite being a graduate of Minzu University, Yizucn's Suyue Feiyang maintains a very different relationship to the university and the social networks, which feed information and provide financial support to Yizuren.com. Suyue's approach is rather commercial, his site features more of an interactive, di-



Promoting ethnicity through the internet and the fusion of translocal Yi communities?

rect approach, which is also underlined by the very "flashy" character of Yizucn's home page.

Outlook: A 'distinctly Yi' virtual culture?

The question remains how effective the two Yi websites will prove to be in the long-term maintenance and propagation of Yi culture and identity. So far, they successfully trigger and promote an interest in the use of websites as a means for exchange and for channeling interest in topics and (charity) projects for the Yi. They have also become a mirror for trends in cultural development, academic research, and policies in different Yi areas, as well as an emotional mirror for self-perception for young Yi with internet access in rural and urban contexts. Yizuren in particular has managed to maintain a distinct online personality with distinct features and to create and hold a balance between academic, semi-academic, and governmental information on the Yi and Yi culture on the one hand, and infotainment and networking that attracts and holds young netizens' attention on the other.

The two sites are generally characterised by a long-term, strategic development, which their operators seek to achieve via regular updates (more user-friendly design and new or reworked categories for materials and articles). Secondly, they structure, filter and channel usage via their heavily frequented chat forums (bbs). Both sites also feature regular posts by affiliated users and members of translocal Yi circles. Moreover, both sites, especially Yizuren, promote and proliferate certain personal markers for ethnic identification, who they designate as carriers of Yi culture. Similarly, both sites also promote non-virtual, social events for Yi culture, charity work, etc., which often intersect with the featured carriers of Yi culture. Also, both sites acquire and promote the support of other, related sites through direct or cross-links (especially Yizucn), and thus draw more Yi-related information together under their banner. Last but not least, the operators, agents and administrators of both sites consist of a highly motivated group of young Yi with a university background, who have a pronounced interest in the proliferation of informa-

tion for the advancement of their culture and their people (or their own personal definition thereof).

The functions of these websites as platforms for information and exchange fulfill a vital role for the Yi as a large, heterogeneous ethnic group, as it is becoming increasingly translocal. The sites connect and bind these Yi, especially those living in large city centers and who have no direct access to Yi culture, into social networks, which are at once local, and geared to local community events, and translocal in character. By providing these platforms, or new, virtual “performative” stages the internet is gradually replacing the meanings and symbolic stamina of the physical stages of the Beijing Yi diaspora, which have fulfilled a crucial function in gathering and uniting the urban Yi over the past 30 years. Yet this does not imply that virtual stages for ethnic identity will completely replace physical stages. Rather, virtual platforms are vital extensions of these physical stages, as well as of the individuals and institutions, which have carried, promoted and supported these in the first place. This shows for example in their efforts to create long-term, substantial interfaces for the dissemination of governmental and “non-governmental” information, such as charity projects. Also, posts on these sites promote and create an awareness for issues such as Yi language classes, copyright in music, and intangible cultural heritage protection in China (ICH) and its potential for promoting Yi culture. Last but not least increased efforts to create umbrella organisations for Yi interests and (cultural) funding, such as the Association of Yi Entrepreneurs (Yizu Qiyejia Xiehui) have been allocated a greater presence within the public, virtual realm, in order to generate both support and recognition, and perhaps also for the motivation for group action in the economic realm.

These efforts notwithstanding I would question how effective virtual platforms can be in generating a concept of “Yi identity” within a cultural and social context, which remains, by definition, fragmented. Cultural, linguistic, and economic heterogeneity

continue to dominate and may even undermine the efforts of the young generation of visionary website operators to create unity in diversity and act in light of a common cultural and social cause. In early July 2010 I was told by an individual actively involved in one website that attempts were being made to draw all Yi-related virtual platforms together to create, if not a single web identity at least some order within the chaos of the many, and often individually tainted, thematically one-sided, and often short-lived sites. Despite many existing cross-links between these sites (especially Yizucn), though, this plan has not yet materialised.

There are other challenges, such as finances and content, e.g. maintaining a healthy balance between information, academia, chat and other entertainment gadgets. As I was told by Mao Fahu in 2006, although censorship does take place via the operators of the sites (according to state rules and regulations), and mainly on the chat forums, this usually does not affect the diversity of quality of the materials presented. Another question is whether or not the content of the two websites as well as the ways in which they are structured and used, could be identified as being ‘specifically Yi’? This is difficult to determine and would require an in-depth study on user profile and modes of thinking and interest, as well as a comparison with similar websites of other ethnic groups in China. The real question rather, how and why operators gear specific information towards specifics user groups, and how and on what grounds pieces of information are clustered together and promoted as a cluster. By building on earlier, ‘real’ networks these websites have successfully woven existing networks and platforms into more potent patterns of (virtual) Yi ethnic identity and cultural awareness. It remains to be seen how potent they can be for the further, and “non-governmental” promotion of Yi culture, as well as for the cohesion of a collective ‘Yi’ ethnic identity.

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www.yizuren.com (彝族人网)
<http://music.yizuren.com/> (彝族人网民族音像, Ethnic Audio)
<http://yizucn.com> (中国彝族网—网聚中国彝族)
<http://yizucn.com/bbs>, <http://www.yizucn.com/forum.php> (彝人论坛)
<http://blog.yizucn.com/> (彝人博客)
<http://www.yizucn.com/mp3/> (Yizucn Music)
<http://www.yizucn.com/mv/> (中国彝族视频网)
<http://222.210.17.136:81/zgyx/> (彝学网)
<http://www.yizuge.com/> (中国彝族音乐网)
<http://t.qq.com/nuosuwww> (彝族人网QQ微博)
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Other:

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