

Between Authenticity and Commodification: Valorization of Ethnic Bai Language and Culture in China

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Abstract

In an era of globalization, language and culture are discursively constructed as technical skills in exchange for marketable values. This is particularly true with ethnic minority languages and cultures which are gaining increasing importance and emerging as commodities for promoting tourism and the local economy. Adopting the concepts of “cultural capital” (Bourdieu, 1986) and “commodification of language and authenticity” (Heller, 2003, 2010), this study examines how ethnic Bai-related language and cultural practices are capitalized as a commodity to enhance the local economy and empower Bai people’s identification with their heritage maintenance. The data were collected through semi-structured interviews and online observations via *WeChat* and *TikTok*. Findings demonstrate that the convertibility of Bai language and cultural capital into economic capital is largely mediated by the promotion of heritage tourism, marketing strategies, and the use of social media. Despite the increasing status of Bai language and culture, this study also demonstrates the tensions between authentication and commodification of Bai heritage language and cultural practices. The study argues that in the socio-economic process of discursive shift, Bai language and culture as “semiotic resources” (Kress, 2010) are not merely seen as symbols of ethnic identity but also regarded as marketable products to cater to market demand. The study can shed light on the empowerment of ethnic minority languages and their heritage maintenance in modern China.

Keywords: tourism, *TikTok* and *WeChat*, cultural capital, authenticity and commodification, the Bai language, semiotic resources

1. Introduction

The expanding influence of globalization on linguistic groups worldwide has been demonstrated by many recent studies. According to Blommaert (2010, p. 1), “the world has become a complex ‘web’ of villages, towns, neighborhoods, and settlements connected by material and symbolic ties in often unpredictable ways.” This perspective offers a fresh perception on how globalization has not only contributed to a more homogeneous or uniform society but also involves a historical process that has increased diversity (Blommaert & Rampton, 2011). The “Chinese dream” narrative is encouraging international migrant students from nearby nations like Myanmar to study in China for various levels of formal education through degree programs offered in Putonghua in the current era of globalization (Li, Ai, & Zhang, 2020; Li & Han, 2020). The remarkable language learning tales of Chinese students learning Thai through Zhuang and Lao students learning Chinese through Thai are examined as ties between China, Laos, and Thailand becomes closer (Li, 2021b). It’s important to note that the coronavirus crisis that engulfed the entire world in 2019 has brought attention to the expanding significance of linguistic diversity (Li, Xie, Ai, & Li, 2020; Piller, Zhang, & Li, 2020). Globalization has expedited the movement of people, information, and languages through the rapidly expanding industry of tourism. A surge in tourism after Lijiang’s inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage list has aided in the preservation and revival of the Naxi language, the Dongba scripts (Yang, 2012). Based on the promotion of tourism, Pallarès, the regional dialect of the Western Catalan type, provides tourists from other Catalan-speaking regions with a wealth of vocabulary (Anand, 2014).

According to Heller (1999), current globalization processes influence language usage and change. It opens up new channels and gives the minority population a chance to exert more power over the world market. Ethnolinguistic minorities are viewed as illuminating sites in the process of language commodification because of the way that their multilingual repertoires have acquired new and unprecedented forms of prestige (Heller, 2003). This process is present in several minority language groups in China. According to Yang (2012), the Naxi language has

developed into a genuine good for consumption in the country's tourist industry. Wang (2015) points out that the creation of Hip-Pop in the Enshi dialect and the design of Tujia clothes for commoditizing authenticity in heritage tourism are two examples of how language and culture have undergone a semiotic reconfiguration. In other places of the world, it is also applicable. According to Heller's (2003) argument, heritage tourism has pushed the language and identity of French speakers in Francophone Canada to become commodified. The process of Russian commodification in the service sector is examined by Aneta (2017) concerning the Russian pattern of international spending. Pietikäinen (2013) notes that the hotel and restaurant are "selling out" the Sámi heritage by using Sámi symbols and languages, which gives them a sense of authenticity and originality. These studies highlight the importance of closely monitoring regional, governmental, and international political and economic trends while attempting to comprehend linguistic ideology and practices in minority communities.

The Bai community in Shuanglang town is seeing an economic shift from a fishing-based economy to tourism, similar to what is happening in these minority language communities. However, there is not much published on the evolving discourse of the Bai language, the local dialect of the Bai people in Dali, Yunnan. This article examines how the globalized new economy, with a focus on the tourist industry, and well-known social media affect the beliefs and behaviors of Bai speakers. Gao (2012) discovered that the promotion of English as a semiotic resource for developing the location as a "Global Village" resulted in the devaluation or even eradication of the native dialect of Yangshuo County. This demonstrates how a variety of intricate local and global factors are entwined with language ideologies and practices. The study of these variables sheds light on how language ideologies are constructed and have consequences for maintaining linguistic diversity.

2. Contexts of the Study

2.1 Linguistic and Culture Diversity in China

China is a country with rich linguistic and cultural diversity. According to the data, '70% of China's 1.4 billion people speak eight different types of Mandarin' (Li, 2020b). Putonghua is officially designated as the standard variety of Chinese Mandarin, but only a very small number of Mandarin speakers speak standard varieties of daily communication. The "Belt and Road Initiative" expands the pool of foreign students and migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia who participate in domestic social events, enhancing China's linguistic diversity. China officially recognizes fifty-five ethnic minority groups, which are understood to each have distinct languages or writing systems. Geographically isolated Yunnan province is frequently linked to economic stagnation. It has 25 ethnic minorities with the highest concentration of ethnolinguistic minority citizens in the country. Due to its cultural variety, Yunnan was chosen by the National Tourist Administration in 2009 as the first pilot province for the overall development of the country's tourism business. The Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China (2009) picked a number of picturesque locations surrounding Erhai Lake as the program's trial locations. While tobacco has historically been the major source of income for Yunnan, tourism is now one of the three key sectors. Li (2020a) introduces that tourism gives ethnic minority groups commercial possibilities relating to their minority languages, and their languages and cultural items turn into a type of capital that helps the local economy.

2.2 Multilingualism on Media

Media is increasingly being used as a platform for multilingual practices and innovations, a location to observe information about multilingual communities and diverse languages, as well as a window through which to examine language ideologies and linguistic markets, claim Kelly-Holmes and Pietikäinen (2013). A person may favor one language in a media setting over another for a variety of reasons. Or to put it another way, this choice is the result of personal linguistic ideologies. The rise of different social media online facilitates the revival of Chinese "Fangyan", a dialect of Mandarin, according to research conducted by Dr. Li Jia and Ms. LV Yong with their undergraduate students. For example, Sichuan Fangyan served as an indicator of the veracity of Ne Zha's Sichuan origin in the animated film "Ne Zha." The popular music TV program "1.3 Billion Decibel" promotes Fangyan through singing competitions, giving talented singers a platform to showcase their abilities. The Huawei company uses advertisements in Fangyan as commodified capital to market its mobile phone and draw in customers from a variety of linguistic backgrounds. Mixian, a poor Hani singer, became famous suddenly and gained fame thanks to the success of the Hani pop song "My Hani (Honey) Baby," which was a combination of Hani language, English, and Putonghua and once popular in the media (Li, 2021a). From the aforementioned examples, it is evident that language ideology is at play whenever a person or organization attempts to make language decisions. These decisions are connected to the perceived value and function of a specific language. This study investigates how *TikTok* shapes and has an impact on the ideology of Bai speakers.

2.3 Socioeconomic and Demographic Contexts of Shuanglang

In the last ten years, Shuanglang Town has seen a dramatic transformation, as evidenced by the change in its economic foundation from traditional agriculture to tourism. It can be reached by car in approximately an hour from the Dali Airport and is situated on the northeastern side of Erhai Lake, 46 kilometers northeast of Dali City in Yunnan Province (see Figure 1). Jinsuo Island and Yuji Island surround the town, and it is from here that one may take in the breathtaking natural landscape of Cangshan Mountain and Erhai Lake. Prior to 2009, it was a fishing community with more than a millennium-long history. The local Bai minority population relies on fishing for a living in addition to farming traditional crops such rice, corn, beans, rice, and barley and processing preserved plums. Due to its excellent geographic location, the distinctive folklore of the Bai ethnic group, and the landmark Sun Palace of Yang Liping—well-known China’s dancer and the inventor of the Peacock Dance—it has, however, been supported by government policy and the rising national income and has attracted significant domestic and international interest. Locals’ life has changed as a result of tourism. As travelers flocked to Shuanglang, a continual stream of market demand for lodging, food, and souvenirs fueled the expansion of hotels, eateries, and gift shops. Some residents have transitioned from being farmers to innkeepers by converting their courtyards into hotels. According to the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture People’s Government (2020), the town received 2.1243 million visitors in September 2019 and generated 1.904 billion yuan in tourism income, representing annual growth rates of 33.01 percent and 47.25 percent, respectively. The modernization and transformation of tourism have yielded outstanding outcomes. It was chosen on August 25, 2021, to be included in the first group of 100 important rural tourism towns (townships) by the National Development and Reform Commission and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the People’s Republic of China (2021).



Figure 1. The map of Erhai Lake

Shuanglang Town is surrounded by Bai, Yi, Lishu, Naxi, Dai, and Han inhabitants, among whom Bai ethnic groups are the majority. The Bai is one of the 55 officially-recognized ethnic minorities in China. The population of the ethnic Bai is estimated to be 2,091,543 in 2021 (China Statistical Yearbook, 2021). The Dali Autonomous Administrative Prefecture is home to the majority of the Bai people in China. Others reside in the close-by counties of Yunnan, Guizhou's Bijie, Sichuan's Liangshan, and Hunan's Sanzhi. Bai has its language, which belongs to the Yi language branch of the Tibet-Burma language group in the Chinese-Tibetan language family but it relies on the writing system of Mandarin Chinese. The southern dialect, the center dialect, and the northern dialect are the three dialects of the Bai language. (National Ethnic Affairs Commission of the People's Republic of China) The southern dialect, commonly known as the Dali dialect, is spoken by the majority of Bai people. The Shuanglang residents speak a southern dialect.

3. Theoretical Framework

The notion of "capital" (Bourdieu, 1986) highlights the importance of accumulation in the social world and serves as a practical, theoretical lens for interpreting the processes of accumulation of knowledge and reproduction by agents within the social structure. "Capital is accumulated labor (in its materialized form or its 'incorporated,' embodied form) which, when appropriated on a private, i.e., exclusive, basis by agents or groups of agents, enables them to appropriate social energy in the form of reified or living labor" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 15). In short, capital can empower agents to reproduce their position within the social structure and reveal the inherent mechanics of the society. Depending on the field where it functions, capital can manifest itself in three fundamental guises: economic, cultural, and social capital. All forms of capital are convertible and transmissible. For instance, Goldstein (2007) elucidates how the linguistic capital of immigrant students who were born in Hong Kong use Cantonese and English in a Canadian school cashed in for educational qualifications or cultural capital, which in turn cashed in for lucrative jobs or economic capital.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) developed the concept of "cultural capital" to analyze the impact of culture and education on social reproduction. In *Reproduction in Education, Society, and Culture*, cultural capital is described as consisting of linguistic aptitude, knowledge or skills, and general cultural acquisitions, as well as academic credentials. From Bourdieu's perspective, cultural capital can be understood as a form of capital, which "is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications" (1986, p. 16). He recognizes that "cultural capital is predisposed to function as symbolic capital" (1986, p. 18), which "is perhaps the most valuable form of accumulation in a society because it is readily convertible back into economic capital" (1977a, p. 179).

"Linguistic market" is a market metaphor put forward by Bourdieu (1991) implies that there is a marketplace where "linguistic exchange" takes place between a speaker and a listener. "Discourse is a symbolic asset which can receive different values depending on the market on which it is offered" (Bourdieu, 1977b, p. 651) means that different languages and varieties have different symbolic values under different markets. As a type of cultural competence, linguistic competence functions as "linguistic capital" regarding a certain market. The process of "linguistic exchange" is seen as a process of "economic exchange" which involves a speaker's linguistic competence that enables the speaker to procure "material or symbolic profit" within the occasion of each social exchange. The concept of capital has been found highly useful in analyzing Bai speakers' dynamic discourse processes and changes as it considers language as not merely a means of communication, but also "an instrument of action or power" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 37) through which individuals pursue their profits.

In keeping with this theoretical framework, I explore answers to the following questions:

- 1) How does the linguistic capital of a Bai speaker convert into profits?
- 2) By what means does the cultural capital of a Bai speaker turn into a source of income?
- 3) To what extent can speaking the Bai language and maintaining Bai culture empower Bai speakers?

4. Methodology

4.1 Background of the Participant

Zhang Yingying, a 34-year-old woman who goes by the alias, was raised in Shuanglang a Bai minority language village. She satisfies both requirements that make up the fundamental components of this investigation. She is one of the frequent users of *TikTok*, which has the potential to be a promotional tool for fashion brands. She also exemplifies the typical grassroots entrepreneur in the context of tourist development. At the age of 16, she dropped out of middle school and began working for Yunnan Nationalities Village, where she received formal and intensive training in producing traditional handicrafts, including straw sandals and hats, embroidered shoes, belts, and hair accessories, professional dancing and singing practice, manners, and tourism interpretation. She eventually became

a dancer, singer, and tour guide who can speak Bai, “Han Hua” (Yang, 2012), and Putonghua at the same time. She was a rural migrant worker who quit her job and moved back to Shuanglang in 2010 to establish a business by operating an ethnic barbeque stall out of duty to her family. She was 23 years old at the time. Soon after, the town’s tourist industry had an increase in activity, allowing her to build up some financial wealth over the course of the previous 10 years.

She closed the barbeque stand in 2020 and started running a guest home, a characteristic Bai clothing shop, and several other tourist-related businesses. She provides her renters with a dependable tour experience and is a pleasant and welcoming host. She is a trailblazer and a very creative individual who has dedicated herself to designing comfortable clothing that is more in line with everyday usage than traditional costumes. She does this by utilizing her exceptional sewing, knitting, and embroidery talents. She is nimble in business, often coming up with fresh concepts. She expanded the marketing channel by posting folk songs and donning Bai attire on *TikTok*, where she has already gained 17,000 admirers. As the founder of artistic performance groups, she is also eager to take part in government-sponsored performance events at festivals, such as Rattle Stick Dance, Straw Hat Dance, and “Dabenqu,” a singing performance in the local Bai language accompanied by “Sanxian,” a local musical instrument, either in the form of dialogue for the public on special occasions, or a monologue.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

The data collection process was made up of two different periods: an initial period of observations on *WeChat* and *TikTok* from August 2020 to December 2021 and a subsequent period of intensive interviews and conversations from January to February 2022. The methods consist of observations, semi-structured interviews, and informal conversations.

Observation offers an investigator the opportunity to gather ‘live’ data from naturally occurring social situations (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 396). This study combines the observation on *WeChat* and *TikTok*, providing substantial data with a panorama of the participant’s social and daily movement and capturing the emotional state that comes naturally. *WeChat* is a “super social network”, from an instant messaging application to a hybrid system with advanced functionalities (Zhang, Muñoz, & Hänninen, 2019), the moments showcase the participant’s dynamic life and thoughts. *TikTok*, the Chinese sister-app Douyin, has become one of the world’s most popular video-sharing platforms, amassing more than one billion monthly active users (Pham, 2019). It is not only a platform for creating 15 seconds short videos, but also a site for potential business promotion. The semi-structured interview was conducted one time at the participant’s dress shop and three times on the cellphone and each interview ranged from 20 minutes to 30 minutes. Four interviews were conducted, and there is a recording of each interview. A semi-structured interview displays some advantages, in the first place, it gives the interviewee a degree of power and control throughout the interview; secondly, a list of predetermined questions is not necessary thus providing the interviewer a great deal of flexibility; and most importantly, it gives one privileged access to other people’s life (Nunan, 1992, p. 150). Online interaction with informal conversations is conducted through *WeChat*, this phase is mainly centered on in-depth inquiries based on the preliminary collected data. All content was recorded and translated from Chinese into English.

4.3 Data Analysis

Content analysis is adopted for this study. Krippendorp (2004, p. 18) defined it as ‘a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matters) to the contexts of their use’. Simply put, it serves as a reliable scientific tool, thus yielding valid results from analyzing a large number of texts. The range of text is not only limited to written material like interview transcriptions, but also included a wide range of images, maps, sounds, signs, and symbols from media products which are fully consistent with the data collected in this study.

The purposes of content analysis are included determining the psychological state of persons or groups and the description of trends in communication content (Weber, 1990, p. 9). Moreover, content analysis condenses the texts into a summary based on pre-existing categories and emergent themes to test a theory (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 476). By employing content analysis on decoding the data collected through semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and observations, the general themes of this study come out as “the Bai language has become a necessary linguistic competence in Bai Village”, and “Bai cultural resources turning into commodifiable products for making money”, and “the struggling psychological state embedded in the intertwining discourses of Bai speaker about being authentic or commodified”.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1 Valorization of Bai Language Resources

Minority culture is becoming a key selling point of heritage tourism in Yunnan Province, a remote multilingual area, to meet visitors' appetites for consumption. The Yunnan Nationalities Village, a government-developed national AAAA-level tourism destination, is located on the bank of Dianchi Lake in Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, and serves as a cultural window for 25 ethnic minorities. It is a microminiature of a particular minority that sells refined handicrafts and exhibits vivid folklore and architecture (see Figures 2 and 3), becoming an integral component of the visit for most tourists. The guides, who are virtually usually young women, must be recognized members of their ethnic group who are fluent in their language and folklore (see Figure 4), and they must dress in vibrantly colored renditions of the local garb to convey their ostensibly unusual or distinctive personalities.



Figure 2. The Raosanlin Festival in Bai Village

Source: <http://www.ynmzc.com/>.



Figure 3. The Tie-dyeing cloth products of Bai people

Source: <http://www.ynmzc.com/>.



Figure 4. The guides in Bai Village

Source: <http://www.ynmzc.com/>.

Having grown up in a Bai family, Zhang Yingying is trilingual in Bai, Putonghua, and Han Hua thanks to her heritage from family, nine years of compulsory education, and extensive interaction with the Han people. Her

ability to speak three languages permits her to hold three jobs at once as a dancer, a singer, and a tour guide in the Bai Village in Yunnan Nationalities Village, a very competitive work market. She begins by outlining the significance of multilingual ability and cultural familiarity for a qualified guide as follows:

Example I.

In 2004, when Shuanglang was a fishing village in poverty, I had the good fortune to be employed as an employee alongside the other eight females who had been chosen from sixty applicants in the town by the recruiters from Yunnan Nationalities Villages. They established certain fundamental guidelines to help choose qualified candidates for interviews. One of the requirements was that the candidate must be a Bai person who is fluent in the Bai language and has some knowledge of local folklore, music, and dance. Given that I've been studying to dance and sing since I was seven, it was not at all difficult for me. Speaking the Bai language will help Bai locals feel more at ease and would also demonstrate our authenticity when interpreting the items for other tourists. Undoubtedly, one must command Putonghua and Han Hua to serve out-of-province visitors or non-Bai citizens. Since I was only 16 years old, I had been itching to see the outside world. Without this work, I could currently be a conservative, illiterate housewife (Interview, 03/01/2022).

The recruitment criteria indicating that the tourism marketing strategy is not only focused on landscapes and culture but also on linguistic proficiency, with a particular emphasis on the importance of Bai language proficiency for a particular percentage of tourist interactions. The recruiters valued candidates' Bai linguistic backgrounds as a barrier to employment, this language policy legitimized candidates' Bai linguistic competence and bestows a space to use it together with Putonghua and Han Hua in Bai Village interchangeably. In these circumstances, the Bai identity was seen as possible 'assets or forms of 'added value' in this market (Heller, Pujolar, & Duchêne, 2014).

The significance of knowledge accumulation is emphasized by Bourdieu's capital notion and his work. *Reproduction* attracted a lot of interest because it provides new insight into how education and family circumstances subtly and pervasively influence children's life paths (1977, 1986). Or, to put it another way, the economic and cultural capital one has received naturally or gained later in life shapes the many life paths that each individual takes. Based on these concepts, I see Zhang Yingying's linguistic and cultural resources as the sum of the various levels of knowledge she acquired throughout her adolescent life. She was born into a family that spoke Bai as their native tongue; through her formal schooling, she learned about Putonghua; through daily practice, she gained access to Han Hua; and through her investment of time and effort, she developed singing and dancing skills. Her profession, where she lived, and her way of life were all changed by her multilingual linguistic and cultural capital.

Bourdieu theorized that people make choices about what languages to use in particular kinds of markets (1977b, 1991), here the Bai language is valued and accepted in Bai Village, which serves as a venue for linguistic interchange—and, more straightforward, commercialized exchange between locals and visitors. Additionally, according to a particular market, various linguistic or cultural materials are viewed as having various symbolic meanings. Zhang Yingying's proficiency in the Bai language serves as an essential "linguistic capital," and her familiarity with the Bai culture serves as "cultural capital," enabling her to meet the demands of the regional tourism industry and attain a job that relies on communication skills rather than physical strength. It is acknowledged that one industry where late capitalism's economic realities have a commodifying influence on languages is tourism (Heller, 2010). Heritage and culture, in particular, stressed the need of investing in symbolic added value, and language, as a distinctive resource, may be utilized to represent the community to visitors and brand commercial goods by highlighting the distinctiveness and authenticity of an attraction (Heller et al., 2014). As the participant's location shifts from hometown into the Bai village, an incarnation of a vernacular-speaking space, the Bai language is mobilized as a dynamic resource in this context to foster an authentic feeling and tie an added value to Bai handicrafts to encourage tourists' consumption. As a result, the Bai language is no longer just a sign of communication; it has also been transformed into a symbol of wealth that is to be assessed in the tourism industry. In this way, both the Bai language and the Bai identity become commodities. The fact that Zhang Yingying was successful in obtaining her beloved job demonstrates how Bai language and culture, which are manifestations of the process of language and identity commodification, form symbolic assets. These assets give her the ability to reproduce her social position and alter her life's trajectories, as she put it, choosing either to be a housewife or a respectable worker.

5.2 Convertibility of Bai-semiotic Resources

Technology advancements and globalization not only increased human mobility but also hastened the transmission of information. The use of social media, a quicker and more accessible form of communication, has accelerated

globalization. In the contemporary environment, social media provides a chance for individuals living in remote locations like Shuanglang, as opposed to a city, to engage in global transcultural flows and connect with trans-local audiences without expending arduous effort. Zhang Yingying can be viewed as a person who has experienced significant marginalization because she is a female who was raised in a minority family, dropped out of middle school, and is a grassroots entrepreneur. However, with sharp insight, she learns that social media is an accessible site that may offer her potential opportunities to gain mobility symbolically. *TikTok* offers a specific chance for her to express herself via performing verbal or visual art forms, which will subsequently turn her into a local celebrity and help her overcome the social and physical constraints imposed by the community. Zhang Yingying describes her experience with achieving local fame as below:

Example 2.

A well-liked short video of me wearing traditional Bai attire at my grandpa's birthday party inspired me to share folk songs and dances by donning Bai ethnic costumes on *TikTok*. That was captured and shared on my friend's *TikTok* account, a local photographer, and received over 130,000 likes right afterward. I had no clue it would become so popular, and then the notion of selling ethnic costumes on *TikTok* emerged. Within a few months, I had amassed over ten thousand followers after publishing more than one hundred short videos. Most of my clients, including guests from Dali's neighboring counties, migrant workers in Hebei, Tianjin, and other locations, as well as tourists from other provinces, know me via *TikTok*. Surprisingly, Maoduoli (a well-known candy manufacturer in Yunnan) invited me to participate in its advertisement in May 2021 as the Bai ambassador (Interview, 03/01/2022).

Media serves as a window to examine the digital user's ideologies behind their practices (Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2013). With the help of Bourdieu's cultural capital (1977, 1986), I explore the participant's ideology behind her practices on *TikTok*. Combining the above data with observation on *TikTok*, Zhang Yingying's forms of practices encompassing visual arts range from dances like Rattle Stick Dance, and Straw Hat Dance to showcasing colorful Bai ethnic clothing (see Figure 5) and sharing handicrafts like embroideries, and verbal arts as "Dabenqu" (folk music performed through emblematic use of Bai language) and other styles of music. In this practice process in the virtual world, it is seen as a semiotic process. As opposed to linguistic resources, Kress (2010) puts a variety of elements under the umbrella term "semiotic resources," such as pictures, gestures, music, etc. These semiotic resources denote unique meaning that is culturally, economically, and socially strongly related to the contemporary globalization age. For instance, the "semiotic design" of Tujia attire and Hip-Pop performed in the Enshi dialect aspires to express a certain authenticity fostered by the heritage tourist industry (Wang, 2013). In addition to profit, the Sámi heritage's visual semiotic resources on the notebook collection and labels also suggest a re-articulation of the cultural legacy and a sense of social responsibility (Kati, 2014). Furthermore, cultural resources are significant semiotic resources, and certain semiotic forms are considered the "best possible" resources in each social interaction (Blommaert, 2010). Zhang Yingying focuses on an untapped niche market and uses a variety of specialized, localized cultural resources to help her gain 17,000 followers (observation on *TikTok*), some of whom turned out to be clients and brought her immediate material rewards. In addition, she built a social reputation that led to opportunities for advertising. When viewed in this context, she effectively utilizes her cultural resources—her "best possible" semiotic resources.



Figure 5. The Bai ethnic clothing

Source: ©Hongmei Yang.

Her employment experiences at Yunnan Nationalities Village, where she received official and intense instruction in every facet of the Bai minority, are inseparable from her cultural understanding of ethnic music, dances, clothes, and other handicrafts. I saw the process as a seven-year procedure of accumulating cultural knowledge that became her cultural capital. Additionally, I view *TikTok* as a ‘virtual marketplace’, where these semiotic resources are mobilized and form a part of symbolic capital, which is readily convertible into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1977a). Authenticity is viewed similarly to language as a commodifiable good, typically in the form of cultural goods like music, crafts, and dance (Heller, 2003). What we saw in this ‘virtual marketplace’ was a semiotic process of creating a sense of cultural and identity authenticity that was sparked by local heritage tourism within the global new economy, in which performing regional songs, dances, and ethnic clothing demonstrations were all part of the commodification of the Bai semiotic resources for meeting tourist needs. Utilizing these semiotic resources, the participant created a feeling of musical and dance authenticity on *TikTok* for local and trans-local audiences with the intention of better branding the cultural good known as Bai dresses. Currently, renting Bai traditional costumes and getting pictures taken as mementos among young female tourists in Shuanglang town is a well-liked fad that is developing into a business. The local music and ethnic costumes, which both serve as means of maintaining language and cultural traditions and a means of expressing emotions while also functioning as practical necessities of daily life, have become more and more marketable cultural items as a result of this fashion trend. A strategic “semiotic design” (Wang, 2013) practice is involved and motivated by the ideology that *TikTok* could bring popularity and potential profits in this commodification process of authenticity. Kress (2010) emphasizes that ‘design’ focuses on individuals’ interests now concerning the likely future effects of their actions, and the process of ‘design’ demonstrates one’s agency. Zhang Yingying identified a market niche, strategically organized her cultural capital through the use of “semiotic design” within the confines of her environment, and as a result produced significant opportunities that support the realization of desirable interests, a sizable customer flow, and advertising revenue.

5.3 Tensions over Authenticity and Commodification of Bai-semiotic Resources

Authenticity, as defined by Taylor (2001), is something that is unique, traditional, or real. It also plays a significant

role in encouraging travelers to seek out exotic experiences. When linguistic and cultural capital is mobilized as sources of profit through the commodification of authenticity in heritage tourism, it produces its contradiction due to facing new audiences, new public, and new Others in this process (Heller, 2010). To present authentic, original folk songs on *TikTok* to demonstrate a positive Bai identity or to combine understandable music elements from other cultures to bridge the “distance” (Taylor, 2001) generated by cultural differences to trans-local audiences, is a pair of salient contradictory psychological states that emerge through observation of Zhang Yingying’s *TikTok*. Only 7 of the 210 short videos she put on *TikTok* were determined to be genuine folk songs which refer to “Dabenqu”; the other sections were folk songs sung with Chinese lyrics and other popular music (observation on *TikTok*). The following transcript reveals her conflicted feelings over posting folk songs to *TikTok*.

Example 3.

Although I was a professional folk singer at the Yunnan Nationalities Village, *TikTok* is only a daily form of entertainment, so the short videos need to be entertaining to draw in viewers. For the audience to enjoy a video, it must be understandable and innovative. Playing contemporary music and doing a stylish dance while dressed in ethnic attire is hilarious, and this does draw in more viewers. As a Vlogger, I have to keep up with the trend (*WeChat* transcripts, 16/01/2022).

Zhang Yingying implies her lack of interest in upholding her Bai identity through the sharing of authentic folk songs, referring to “Dabenqu” on *TikTok*. Instead, she has to make amusing videos to draw in additional followers and prospective consumers. Bai people’s “Dabenqu”, a form of Chinese Quyi, is a unique type of compound information resource and an endangered intangible cultural legacy (Wu, 2012). “Dabenqu” was on the list of the fifth batch of representative projects of national intangible cultural heritage approved by the State Council on May, 24th 2021 (The State Council, 2021). It expresses the way of life of the Bai people by drawing on folklore, tales, literature, or everyday life. One of the commonly used genres is seven words in the first three lines and five words in the fourth line of each verse in “Baiyu pinyin wenzi” (see Example 4). The People’s Republic of China’s government has upheld the principle of ethnic and linguistic equality ever since its founding, and ethnic minorities’ use of their spoken and written languages has been bestowed the necessary respect and legal protection (The State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2005). An ancient form of recording the Bai language with Chinese characters in the Tang dynasty, but it was destroyed historically. After the establishment of Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture, under the guidance of the government, a new Bai language written system was enacted, generally known as “the Baiyu pinyin wenzi”, an alphabetic script based on the Latin alphabet, which is roughly the same as the scheme of the Chinese phonetic alphabet in its alphabetical order, orthographic form and pronunciation. Both Chinese and the Bai language are tonal, however Chinese only has four tones, but the Bai language has eight tones, which gives it a catchy sound. Metaphors are expertly manipulated by the Bai people. The small green frog serves as a metaphor for people in “Qiaint odmail.” The Bai concept of living in harmony with their neighbors rather than in conflict can be reflected in the implication that frogs prefer to dive rather than land.

Example 4. (A nursery rhyme excerpted from Zhang Yingying’s *TikTok*)

Qiaint odmail

Qiaint odmail zix sai hainlqionl

Yip de nel nox lv yilkol

Gvp zex not gvp xuixfvhet

Yindgail nox yaf dol

Qiaint odmail zix tul mipjiaind

Vx cux hhop zil mot cux maid

Eid’aid-eid’aid maid gaf cainl

mot tul nel mipjiaind

(The Bai script)

小青蛙

小小青蛙真漂亮

一件绿衣身上套

常居水里少出游

不与人相斗

小小青蛙爱面子

一到下雨它就鸣

哇啦哇啦叫几声

感觉面子好

(Chinese lyrics)

The little green frog

The little frog is adorable

A green coat covers the skin

Lurking under the water, rarely surfacing

Never fights with others

The little frog cares about the face

Whenever it rains, it croaks

Croak, croak, croak

Feeling like a face-related matter

(English lyrics translated by Hongmei Yang)

A site of modern life, *TikTok* is characterized by its youthful user base. Statistics show that 63 percent of *TikTok* active users are under the age of 30 (IQBAL, 2022). Just as Zhang Yingying argues that she must adopt the fashion to delight viewers, it has grown to be a prominent source of information on popular culture. She needs to work painstakingly on the designs to make the short videos as noticeable to invisible viewers as possible. Wearing Bai traditional attire while singing to Chinese mainstream music sounds like a stylish and attention-grabbing strategy to attract more people. What I want to emphasize is that this new approach has not been without its share of struggles. It suggests that the pure indigenous music in the Bai language is somehow unsuited to contemporary *TikTok* practices, resulting in a mixing of the pure and the hybrid. This hybrid form entails conflicting discourse that the kind of symbolic resources once connected to Bai identities that have been traditionally understood as legitimate and are now mobilized as commodities on *TikTok*. Her motivation for merging popular music into Bai culture resources can be attributed to her eagerness to engage in this context of contemporary life to pursue potential financial gain. By switching between these hybrid elements, the participant displays her dual identity as a stylish Vlogger to attract more viewers and a Bai identity to demonstrate her authenticity. As a result, there is a conflict between one's own pride of nationality and prospective capital profit (Aneta, 2017). The dilemma for the participant is whether to be authentic and present audiences with genuine ethnic culture or to merely commodify them to increase revenues.

5.4 Discussion

The findings discussed above relate to the participant's capacity to deploy linguistic and cultural capital when her occupation and location have shifted. Heritage tourism in ethnic minority communities has altered how participants use their numerous categories of resources as a result of tourists' yearning for an authentic experience. Bai language was formerly considered a marker of identity, but nowadays it is used to brand goods, affording Zhang Yingying the possibility to grasp the new opportunity for negotiating her own authentic identity. Heritage tourism provides a platform for the increasing market exposure of the Bai language and elevates it to the status of a requirement for decent employment, assisting the participant in creating a good sense of self and allowing experiencing social upward mobility physically. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize that the revitalization of the Bai language is tied to economic issues on both a local and a national level, not only the language itself.

Social media has changed how we interact in a variety of ways, including how we may exhibit our creativity. *TikTok*, a well-liked media, both promotes and hinders the revival of the Bai language and culture. It incentivizes the participant to use cultural resources to creatively shape her authentic identity and offers new opportunities for the dissemination of the Bai language and culture at an unprecedented rate. However, hybridizing local and trans-local elements, also contributes significantly to the destruction of the integrity of the Bai cultural systems and local authenticity. *TikTok* is also a powerful medium that pulled marginalized resources into its gravitational pull while also exploiting them as a source of supply (Kelly-Holmes & Pietikäinen, 2013). Spreading popular culture instead of authentic culture displays a power relationship in which the popular culture is dominant and the minority culture is subordinate. This is a manifestation of inequality, in which the issue concentrates on the mobility offered by

different semiotic resources Bai local music offers a low degree of mobility while other styles of music offer a considerably larger degree of mobility. Possessing the capacity to benefit from using certain semiotic resources empowers Bai speakers in one sense, whereas resources that do not accurately represent the characteristics of the Bai minority would disadvantage them in another. It poses a challenge and a dilemma for the indigenous Bai inhabitants regarding how to benefit from a tourist boom, improve their economic condition, and preserve their cultural resources more effectively. The endangered Bai culture and the undeveloped, inactive Bai language, which also has a seldom used orthographic form and limited sociolinguistic functions, need to be protected. According to this viewpoint, the crucial issue is that tradition and authenticity are threatened by both commodification and technological innovation. A significant contributor to this issue is the intention to perpetuate cultural authenticity, which is to commodify items for profit rather than inherit them out of pride. The rhetoric of commodification, according to Pietikäinen (2013), also blurs the distinction between strategies for economic development and language revival. Further research is necessary to determine whether the phenomena of language revitalization motivated by economic gain can be compared favorably to the authentic heritage of local culture and language.

6. Conclusion

Echoing the introductory statements, I began by sketching a complete picture of the linguistic diversity of the globe as a result of the growing cross-border and cross-regional migratory flows and the expansion of the tourist industry in the era of globalization. I then provided some instances to show how, in the context of tourism, which is strongly tied to local, national, and global political and economic issues, minority languages and cultures underwent a process of revitalization and commodification. Lastly, I brought up the issue of how social media and the new, globalized economy are affecting the shifting usage of the Bai language in a region that is underrepresented.

Drawing on the concept of “capital” (Bourdieu, 1986), and the theory of “commodification of language and authenticity” (Heller, 2003, 2010), this study contributes a nuanced understanding of the phenomena of Bai language and culture revival by focusing on the realm of tourism sites and social media, where interpretation services through Bai language and the specialized semiotic resources, the indigenous Bai ethnic clothing emerges as desirable commodities in the shifting paradigm of the global new economy.

The first finding was that the Bai language served as a benchmark for a qualified guide regarding tourism policies implemented by the national government that focused on the Yunnan market with the participation of promotional strategies and hiring requirements postulated by Yunnan Nationalities Village, together with both contributing to the commercial exploitation of the Bai language and cultural commodities. The second finding, that Bai semiotic resources can be used as a source of revenue, is primarily attributed to *TikTok*, a well-known cultural agent that has developed into a potential market and given participants the ability to tap into their cultural resources for economic profit. These socioeconomic conditions provide the local Bai identity a considerable amount of power to use their linguistic and cultural resources to overcome the limitations imposed by their surroundings and achieve social and economic upward mobility. However, cognitive dissonance arises when the exchange between various types of capital is interweaving with commodification, and different individuals adopt different strategies to resolve this personal conflict. This study provides an implication on the necessity for individuals in building up self-confidence when the national culture is being impacted by other cultures and maintain a sense of social responsibility as ways out for facilitating cultural resources to grow decommodified and achieve the real revival of language and culture.

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