

# SELF-OTHERING OF MIAO PEOPLES IN ETHNIC TOURISM

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethnic tourism was formed in the early 20th century and first driven by travellers' curiosity and interest in the exotic cultures of ethnic peoples (Hinch & Butler, 2007). In the second half of the 20th century, ethnic tourism was construed as a positive strategy for developing local communities (Hall & Tucker, 2004). The possibility of ethnic tourism promoting traditional culture, attracting investment, and creating jobs for socio-economic growth has also led to a growing number of local communities worldwide engaging with tourism (Warnholtz & Barkin, 2018). How to construct attractive destination images is critical for all tourism stakeholders, since destination images not only influence potential tourists' decision making and satisfaction, but also ultimately influence how host communities change as a result of their involvement in tourism (Wang & Morais, 2014a). However, many tourism studies have predominantly focused on images promoted by the state, by the media and by tourists (Bandyopadhyay & Morais, 2005; Wang & Morais, 2014b), which neglects how the local peoples construct meanings through their self-representation (Wang & Morais, 2014a). The matter is that local ethnic peoples in these tourism representations have been homogenised and portrayed in selective detail to serve the often exploitative purposes of the dominant community (Duncan & Sharp, 1993). Therefore, to deal with the issues above and promote the sustainable development of ethnic tourism, empowering local peoples' voice in tourism is proposed as a critical solution in many studies (d'Hautesserre, 2010; PATA, 2015).

However, exploring local peoples' voice for empowerment is very complicated since it is intertwined in unequal interactions with different

stakeholders and social structures. The theoretical concept of the Other offers a good framework to explore local peoples' voice within such complicated interactions. There are three different paradigms to understand the theory of the Other. The first is from a constructivist paradigm, which conceives the Other to be constructed as an object by social structure and by relatively powerful subjects, without highlighting the Other's subjectivity (Said, 1995; De Beauvoir, 1949). The second is from an existentialist paradigm, wherein the Other is seen as a subject that is completely unaffected by unequal social structure and interactive practices between subjects (Levinas, 1987). Both of these two dialectical relationships separate interactions between agency and structure. However, in critical realism (CR), the world is made up of a plurality of structures, which through their individual and collective agency influence the events that take place and those that do not (Morton, 2006). That is to say, critical realism acknowledges the important interplay between human agency and causative structures in social life (Houston, 2022). The Other in CR is envisioned as a social agency which acknowledges its marginal position that is structurally determined, but also focuses on the Other's agentic powers in creating critical spaces to resist and contest social structure (Mavunga, 2019). In my study, I will provide a theoretical understanding of the subjectivity of the Other under the paradigm of CR.

Self-othering is an important concept to research self-constitutive practices of neoliberal subjectivity (Chowdhury, 2022). However, in contrast to Chowdhury's (2022) notion of repression which investigates how subjects compromise to social structure so as to become the other self, the strategic essentialism of Spivak (1985) draws attention to the resistance of subjects to social

structure, which refers to “a political strategy allowing the members of a discriminated out-group to stand for their rights even at the risk of acknowledging --for a short time the essentialised and stigmatising identity given to them by the othering in-group” (Staszak, 2020 p.26). However, both studies focus on phenomenal analysis, but does not further analyse the casual power hidden behind the phenomenon i.e., the interactive process between the Other and social structure, and the emergent new reality triggered by it. In my study, I will focus on how subjects react to social structure in order for the emergence of a new reality. Specifically, I will

analyse perceptible discourse events and material at the empirical domain, interpret productive practice around social relations and discursive practices at actual domain, and finally explain the causal mechanisms that cause these interactions to occur and present the emergent new reality caused by these interactions based on elaborating material structure, culture structure, and agential structure at real domain of reality (Figure 1). I will apply this theoretical framework to explore how local Miao peoples strategically react to powerful social subjects and social structure in ethnic tourism, namely self-othering of Miao peoples in tourism.

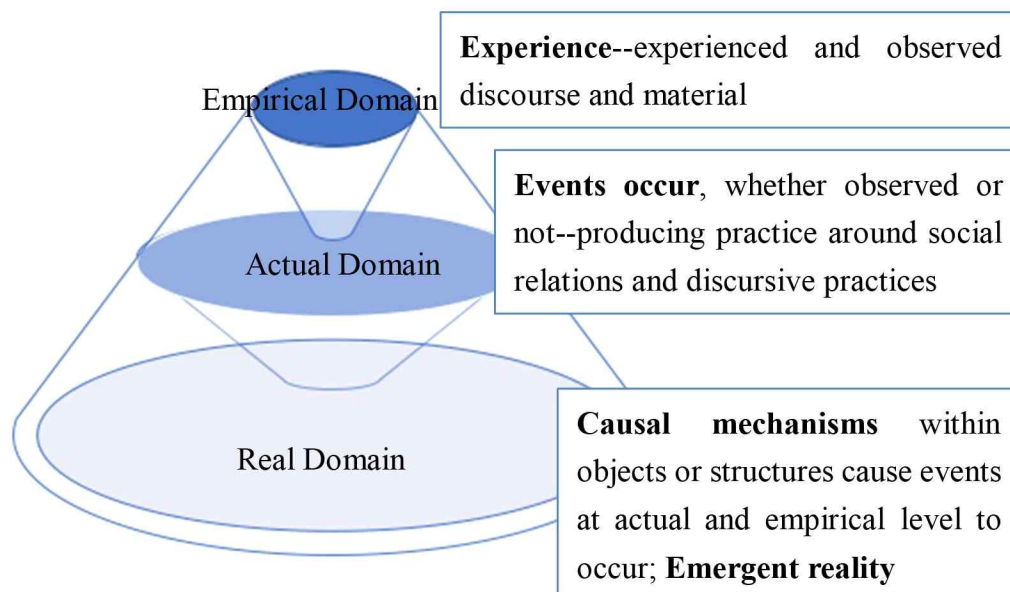


Figure 1. The interaction between the Other and social structure in CR

The term ‘Miao’ in China is used to specifically refer to Miao ethnic minorities. The history of the Hmong in other countries is also closely linked to the current Miao peoples in southeast China (Cula & Michaud, 2004). As Schein (2007 p. 242) pointed out, the past two thousand years of Miao history is one long skein of rebellion, defeat, migration, and flight. According to a mythical legend, the original conflict between Miao peoples and Han peoples was a fight for the control of lowlands between the Yellow River basin and the Yangtze River basin. The Miao peoples’ ancestors, the Chi You tribe, Indigenous peoples of the middle reaches of the Yellow River, were defeated by the Yellow Emperor, the ancestor worshipped by Han

peoples (Yang, 2010). This laid a historical foundation for Miao peoples to be marginal others in opposition to the mainstream Han group in history. Faced with these discriminations, stigmatisation, and repressions, some Miao chose to be absorbed as subjects of the Han state and hence disappeared as a distinguishable Miao identity; some fled to other remote places; some launched large Miao uprisings. As we can see from the book of Xiongdi Minzu Zai Guizhou (The brother minorities in Guizhou), Fei (1985) mentions about a Guizhou local proverb, saying that the Miao ‘launch a small uprising every thirty years, and a large uprising every sixty years’ (三十年一小反, 六十年一大反), attesting to Miao peoples’ strong resistance. These uprisings,

collectively called the ‘Miao rebellion’ in official historiography which is just to make sure that the stigma of having rebelled and caused vast destruction and misery was attached squarely to the Miao and not to the Han (Oakes, 1998). The Miao, in these terms, were represented as those who rebelled, the barbarians rejecting civilisation in Chinese concept (Oakes, 1998).

In a tourism context, characteristics like ‘rebels’ and ‘barbarians’ make the Miao peoples into the exotic Other, and they are therefore valuable for developing ethnic tourism. However, how Miao peoples appropriate the characteristics like ‘rebels’ and ‘barbarians’ in tourism and transform their given reality is seldom researched. Accordingly, my study focuses on strategical reactions of Miao peoples to the mainstream discourse in Upper Langde Miao village, where Miao peoples have been classified as an ethnic minority group by the Chinese government, but are actively involved as the main decision-makers in ethnic tourism (Feng & Li, 2020).

## METHOD

### *Data analysis methods*

My research is to explore strategical reactions of Miao peoples to the hegemonic discourse in the tourism context. Recontextualising the ‘otherness’ from philosophical studies into Miao groups not only needs to examine its meaning from a general level, but also requires me to explore Miao ethnic minorities’ self-othering practice at a local level. Two specific discourses here could be suggested as, for example, how Miao otherness is formed in mainstream discourse, and how local Miao peoples react to mainstream discourse in local discourse. These discourses are formed not only by social structure but also through actions of those local Miao peoples in the village, and ultimately those norms and actions reinforce those same discourses and produce a unique social structure. Thus, critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Fairclough’s approach, which highlights the dialectical relationship between practice and social structure (2003), is good for my research to systematically explore the subjectivity of local Miao peoples by investigating how such tourism practices, events and texts arise out of, and are ideologically shaped by, relations of power and

struggles over power. Historical analysis in Wodak’s (2011) CDA contributes to diachronic and synchronic analysis of discourses, both at a theoretical level and the tourism practices level. Cognitive analysis in Van Dijk’s (2015) CDA further facilitates to get Miao individuals’ own interpretation of his or her otherness in tourism. Thus, CDA adapted in my research is a hybrid of many different schools of thought, mainly based on Fairclough’s semantically analytical framework and adapted from different schools’ distinctive features as supplements.

### *Secondary data collection*

Firstly, in order to know how Miao otherness is conceptualised in mainstream discourse from a macro layer, documentations are collected following specific questions. For example, what is the concept of the term of the Other? What is the value of the Other for stakeholders?

Then, documents about Miao peoples’ history, culture, social system from a meso layer are collected to understand Miao Otherness. Also, documents about my case site - the Upper Langde Miao Village are collected to understand the representation of Miao peoples’ self-othering in tourism development processes from a micro layer.

### *First-hand data collection*

The first-hand data collection at Upper Langde Miao village was carried out between 2019 and 2022, with most of the unstructured interviews and participant observation taking place over four extended periods in September 2019, July and August 2021, November 2021, and January 2022 (72 days in total). Interviews were respectively conducted at The Upper Langde Dalu Eco-Tourism Company (ULDEC), with the village committee, at performance venues, and at home of villagers. I have interviewed local peoples, including village leaders, villagers of different ages, tourism staff, and tourists. The questions centred on their views on tourism development, their social system, lifestyle, and livelihoods. Apart from interviews, travelling in the village was also undertaken to observe local peoples’ lifestyle. I am partially of Miao decent but raised and educated amongst the majority population. Thus, spending time with the locals, picking up some of their languages, and even

accompanying them on the occasional chore (such as taking care of a souvenir shop with the vendor, etc.) allowed me to further develop an ‘insider’ perspective (Morris et al, 1999).

## IMPLICATIONS

This research aims to use the critical realism paradigm to explore the strategical reactions of Miao peoples to mainstream discourses in tourism from a theoretical framework of the Other. It aims to develop the theory of the Other by adding a critical realist understanding which can not only enhance the subjectivity of the Other as a challenge to unequal relations in reality, but also break the binary opposition between the Self and the Other. Apart from the theoretical implication this research aspires to, it also aims to further highlight the significance of the current self-determination tourism practices in my case site--Upper Langde Miao village and provide a positive learning reference for ethnic minorities in other tourism villages.

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