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Faculty of Arts and Humanities

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A Remote Sociosemiotic Ethnographic Study of Ethnicity in a Multi-ethnic Region in China

by

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Abstract

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This thesis explores what semiotic resources and signs are available and how they are designed, resemiotized, and assembled to represent the Dai culture by people at a Dai culture themed restaurant in Yunnan, China. It also traces the impact of sociopolitical agendas and ideologies on social actors' multi-semiotic practices and perceptions. It aims to examine two themes attached to ethnicity, taking the Dai as an example, in the Chinese context: the diversity of ethnic cultural representations and the complicated entanglement of social structure and agency in the (re)construction of ethnicity. To these ends, I adopt a sociosemiotic ethnographic approach, which combines social semiotics (e.g. Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005) with ethnography of multiscale contexts (e.g. Hawkins, 2018; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008a, 2008b; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010), within the social constructionist paradigm. I draw on observations of collected photos and video clips, interviews, a corpus of political and public discourses, and my reflections. The thesis integrates two analytical methods — a critical analysis of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs (CASs) based on Peirce's theory of signs and a critical discourse analysis (CDA) (e.g. Fairclough, 2001; van Dijk, 1993).

CASs is adopted to interpret semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers and their (re)semiotization and (re)assemblages. Through it, I have unpacked how multi-semiotic practices and semiotic (re)assemblages mobilize accessible cultural and natural resources and signs and involve the interplay between social forces and actors. CDA is used to examine how discourses and ideologies are entangled in (re)constructing ethnic culture and identity and how structure-agency dynamics play out in this entanglement. From this critical lens, I have unveiled how semiotic and developmentalist ideologies have impacted individuals' perceptions, design, and use of ethnic cultural resources and signs; and how the (re)construction of provincial and individuals' identities is intertwined and achieved through a structure-agency interplay. The research findings that ethnic culture and identity are socially (re)constructed through multi-semiotic and context-dependent resources and practices shed light on future studies of ethnicity. The sociosemiotic ethnography adopted in this study has wider implications for future context-specific and critical-analytical research, especially to be conducted in a world where multimodal semiosis becomes the norm of social (inter)actions.

Key words: sociosemiotic ethnography, social constructionism, eco-ethnicity in China, multi-semiotic resources and practices, structure-agency dynamics, CASs, CDA

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I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

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Definitions and Abbreviations

DJL ..... the Dai culture themed restaurant in which the fieldwork of this research was conducted

ERGO II ..... Ethics and Research Governance Online: the University of Southampton centralized ethics management system

the CPC/CCP ..... the Communist Party of China/the Chinese Communist Party

the PRC..... the People's Republic of China

the RIG ..... the Research Integrity and Governance committee

Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Overview: research aims and questions

My decades-long life experience in a multiethnic province in China coupled with my study in the UK has motivated me to explore the ethnic minorities in China from a compound lens of social semiotics and ethnography within social constructionism, which sheds some light on how China's political, economic, and historical factors engaged with social actors contribute to social changes. Specifically, it aims to unpack how ethnicity is (re)defined and (re)constructed by the entanglement of social forces and actors across multiple scales in contemporary China. To this end, this research examines how various languages, art, natural materials, artefacts, food, etc. — *semiotic resources* — in a multiethnic region are used and remade by the people working in an ethnic minority culture themed restaurant in Yunnan Province, China, when they produce creative artefacts and other designs (e.g. wall paintings, signage, food presentations, interior and exterior decors) to represent ethnic culture and identity. Moreover, it explores how sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors underpinned by certain ideologies within the social context impact the individuals' multi-semiotic practices and perceptions.

In van Leeuwen's (2005*) Introducing Social Semiotics*, semiotic resources — traditionally known as *signs* — refer to both obvious modes of communication and representation including languages, gestures, images, and music, and less obvious ones such as food, clothing, and everyday objects. Importantly, all these resources are socially (re)made and carry discernible cultural values and social regularities, the imprint of social environments, and significance, therefore capable of representing social phenomena and changes (Hawkins, 2018; Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005). *Significance* derives from social practices that produce meaning and that make things mean (Hall, 1997). In other words, the meanings of semiotic resources and signs rely on shared knowledges about the rules and practices existing in specific social contexts where the resources are selected, shaped, and used (Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005; Vannini, 2007); and vice versa, knowledges are constructed and given shape in *representation* — the (re)making of meaning (Kress, 2001, 2010). In sum, social semiotic theory attends to semiotic resources/socially (re)constructed signs, meaning, meaning-

making practices/semiosis, and extra-semiotic conditions such as *discourses* — socially constructed knowledges enacted through social and semiotic practices (van Leeuwen, 2005). Aligning with this stance, this research also examines the social context and traces how the social mechanisms such as sociopolitical agendas, sociohistorical changes, and ideological discourse shape semiotic resources, practices, and assemblages — various ethnic representations — as well as social actors' relevant perceptions.

In this introduction, my *subjugated knowledges* (Foucault, 2003; see 5.2.1) of the multiethnic region in China and my PhD study journey in the UK, along with my reflexive understanding arising from them, are unpacked (1.2). They are embedded with two key themes attached to ethnicity in China: the diversity of ethnic cultural representations; and the entanglement of sociopolitical and socioeconomic forces with the (re)construction of ethnicity. The two themes have focused my research on examining:

1. *what* semiotic resources and signs as ethnic representations are available;
2. *how* they are used and interpreted;
3. and what purposes the resources and signs as well as the use of them serve within the sociopolitical and socioeconomic context (i.e. *why*).

To address these questions, a sociosemiotic ethnographic approach within the paradigm of social constructionism is adopted, which provides this research with both theory and analytics to examine semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers, and social forces intertwined with the design and use of them. It makes a methodological contribution due to its context-specific and critical-analytical sensibilities and its attention to *the multimodal world* (Kress, 2010) where increasingly diverse semiotic resources and signs are engaged in everyday life.

1.2 My life journey: rationale for this research and my reflections

I am an outsider to the ethnic minority communities in terms of my ethnolinguistic background, while I was born and grew up in an ethnic minority autonomous county in Yunnan where the Yi (an ethnic minority group) community is located. In addition, I have five-year teaching experiences in a multi-ethnic (Dai, Lahu, and Wa) township located in the vicinity of the China-Myanmar border and four-year teaching experiences at a local university where my students are members of different ethnic groups from both Yunnan

and other provinces in China. In this sense, I have certain insider's knowledges of the broader sociocultural context of Yunnan, which is home to 25 ethnic groups, with 26 minority languages and 22 scripts being used (Yang & Zhao, 2021; Wang et al., 2022).

My *dual role* of both an insider and an outsider to that multiethnic community, later attached with a third role of a research student studying overseas, and more importantly my struggles to mediate between my triple roles and different social contexts and institutional systems during my study have shaped the essence of this research. That is, it aims to explore semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers including languages, artefacts, and natural materials in a multilingual and multicultural context, and examine the impact of sociohistorical, economic, and political factors on the use and (re)semiotization of the resources and signs. Additionally, this journey has unpacked that in Yunnan diverse cultural and natural resources are mobilized and modalized as ethnic representations (1.2.1) and when it comes to ethnicity, both social actors' agency and social structure are at play (1.2.2).

1.2.1 Cultural and natural diversities: a glance at ethnicity in Yunnan

This section unpacks various semiotic resources and signs as ethnic identifiers available and accessible in two social settings, namely, educational institutions and ethnic restaurants. These observations are derived from my lived and work experiences in the multiethnic region in Yunnan for more than three decades.

1.2.1.1 Accessible ethnic resources in educational institutions

In 2010, I worked as a volunteer teacher at a junior high school in a multi-ethnic county in Yunnan. According to the regional language regulations back then, to work in that county officially (my service period was five years), I was to be tested on an ethnic minority language. In China, the minority language proficiency test mainly serves to identify proficiency for work-related applications, improve minority language teaching, and recruit students for relevant majors of tertiary study (Wu et al., 2022). As a Han (the ethnic majority in China), I had not learned any ethnic minority language before. Moreover, it was until two days before the test that I was informed about it, though I was

allowed to choose one of the major ethnic minority languages (Dai, Lahu, and Wa languages) used in that county for the test. Cornered by the time limitation, I chose Lahu language which, as I was told, was the easiest to learn, and I turned to my Lahu students for help.

Seldom being asked to teach a teacher, almost the whole class stayed in the classroom after school to help me out. For the two late afternoons, I found myself sitting in the middle of the classroom, surrounded by a large group of students who, both Lahu and other ethnic groups, helped me to translate the standard Chinese phrases and sentences on the test paper into spoken Lahu language. I was laughed at frequently because of my funny pronunciations. Even the students who were usually quiet and shy due to their poor school performance could not help correcting my mistakes without laughing out loudly. While struggling to remember the "strange" pronunciation of each word in such a short time, an idea came to my mind. Once I was told that Lahu language was co-created by European and American missionaries (see Bradley & Bradley, 1999; Turner, 2005; Yang, 2009) and that there were some similarities between English and Lahu language.

With this in mind, I used both English phonetic alphabet and *pinyin* (romanization system for standard Chinese) to note down the Lahu pronunciations. It worked and I passed the test. That said, I was also required to sing a toasting song in Lahu which accounted for 15 percent of the total score, but, even with the students' help, I gave it up after several attempts. In sum, this experience made me notice that these practices not only mobilized my semiotic resources (e.g. standard Chinese script and *pinyin*, English phonetic alphabet and enunciation, singing) and the semiotic and spatial resources assembled in that classroom (e.g. the students' semiotic resources, the test paper, the layout of the classroom), but they also strengthened the bond between the students and me.

Inspired by that experience, when I became an English lecturer at a local university in Yunnan in 2017, I made several attempts to encourage the students to draw upon various named languages (e.g. English, standard Chinese, ethnic minority languages, and local dialects) and cultures (e.g. British culture, American culture, Chinese traditional culture, and ethnic minority cultures), and multi-modal resources (e.g. images, drawings, music, food) in my class. Such attempts were made originally to

engage the students into English language learning, but these practices were surprisingly creative and transformative insofar as I wondered why I had not noticed the students' creativity and meaning-making abilities before. Specifically, my students at that university were P.E., art, and music majors, who chose their majors mainly not because of their interest and gift but because of their low academic performance. That is why they commonly had low expectation for their future and most of them believed that the best choice for them was to be a teacher in their home village or county. To help them see more possibilities, for example, I asked the art majors to compare European, Asian, Chinese, local, and minority styles of paintings and architectures, and then create their own styles by using power point, drawings, English, Chinese, etc. From their works, I began to know them better, and more importantly, some students started recognizing their own abilities and preparing for pursuing further study or other job opportunities (e.g. comic book writers, cartoonists).

Inspired by these working experiences, I planned to conduct my PhD research in that multi-ethnic region. During my second year in the U.K., I contacted my former students. Noticing my interest in the artworks involving ethnic elements, they shared some photos of their recent artworks with me. They are reduction woodblock paintings, a kind of color woodcutting technique originated from that specific region in Yunnan in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is more commonly known as *jueban muke* 绝版木刻 (*jueban* woodblock prints) in China, to foreground the technique of reduction (Hu, 2019)[1]. What makes this woodblock print unique is not only the technique but also its genre. It is the combination of German Expressionism (Zhang, 2014)[2] and the local minority folk art in Yunnan. That is why many of reduction woodblock paintings are themed on ethnic minority elements (e.g. *China News*, 2023)[3].

Unsurprisingly, the students' woodblock paintings spoke loudly about their ethnic background. Of the four woodblock paintings that the students sent to me, three of them are related to the popular themes about Yunnan, namely, Dai Buddhist temples and Dai bamboo houses, with Dai script. The rest one is a landscape of a paddy field. Paddy fields are common landscapes in the rural areas in south China, but as a Yunnan local/Yunnaness, I recognized it as a terraced paddy field, which immediately reminded me of the Hani people (an ethnic minority group). They are the fourth largest ethnic group in Yunnan and are well-known for their rice cultivation (Jiao, et al. 2012). The

student who created the painting confirmed that it was a landscape of her hometown, a Hani village.

I rechecked the English assignments that the students submitted when I was their English teacher in 2021. Through the comparison, I realized that in my class even though the students were encouraged to express themselves with various elements and modes that they were familiar with, there were limited semiotic resources (e.g. English, Chinese, drawings) being mobilized. Comparatively, the woodblock paintings unpack more about the students through assembling more diverse semiotic resources, such as the students' biographic background, the local landscapes and folk art. Because of this realization, I wonder why ethnic minority languages and other cultural resources were commonly excluded and seldom valued in English class even in a multi-ethnic area. Furthermore, as part of ethnic minority students' resources, if not accessible in the classroom, then where are these resources allowed to be mobilized and how are such practices perceived?

It turned out later that even ethnicity related research was restricted in educational institutions (see 1.2.1.2). That is why I had no choice but to relocate my research somewhere. It was also when it came to me that one of my acquaintances just opened a Dai culture themed restaurant and I was intrigued by the ethnic vibe of the restaurant which was shared on her social media. The restaurant thus became the new site in which this research was conducted. That means, taking the Dai ethnic group as the focus of this research was constrained by sociopolitical factors (see 5.2.3) and made possible by my own lived experience. That is, my long-time acquaintance with my key participant, who happened to run a Dai culture themed restaurant in Yunnan. The following section further explains the sample selection of this research.

1.2.1.2 Sample selection: a bite of the Dai culture

This research in ethnicity in China has adopted a convenience sampling approach out of ethical considerations and sociopolitical constraints (see 1.2.2.1 and 5.2.3). *Convenience sampling*, according to Henry (1990), is the approach adopted to "select cases based on their availability for the study" (p.18). A convenience sample hence is "a group of individuals who are readily available to participate in a study" (ibid.). That

means, in the context of this research, the Dai group is selected as the representative case of ethnic minority groups in China mainly because of the accessibility of the Dai culture themed restaurant for me to conduct my research. This approach also applies to the participant recruitment. The major individuals recruited for this study are involved in the making of the restaurant and as it happens, most of them are members of the Han group (see 5.3.2). Though the sampling is constrained by ethical and political considerations, the Dai community in Dai Autonomous Prefecture of Xishuangbanna, as one of the trailblazers for the ethno-and-ecotourism in Yunnan, is the most well-known and recognizable ethnic minority group across China. In this sense, the Dai group epitomizes the (re)construction of ethnicity which is entrained by the political-economic market in current China.

Xishuangbanna is a tourist destination in China renowned for its subtropical scenery, rich animal and botanical resources, and diverse ethnic cultures with 13 ethnic groups living there (Yang & Wall, 2009a, 2009b; see 4.4.2). To illustrate the cultural and natural diversities in Xishuangbanna, an article published on *Global Times* titled “Dai people’s awe of nature reflected in daily meals” (Luo, 2023)[4] is a case in point. This article starts with a photo of the well-known Dai delicacy — the Peacock Banquet (*kongqueyan* 孔雀宴). It is a feast in both nature and the Dai culture, which features dozens of dishes, such as steamed coloured glutinous rice, roasted vegetables and meat wrapped in banana leaves (known as *baoshao* 包烧), steamed Dai festival cakes (made of glutinous rice flour), deep-fried insects (e.g. grasshoppers, bamboo worms), and lemongrass grilled fish (a signature Dai dish), being artfully presented on banana leaves and decorated with tropical fruits, fresh flowers, and raw leafy vegetables to mimic a peacock’s display of its plumage (see Image 1.1). For the Dai people, peacocks are a symbol of auspiciousness, beauty, and peace, because of their belief in Hinayana/Theravada Buddhism, in which peacocks are considered to be the sacred animal of the Buddha (Shi, n.d.[5]; see also 7.3.1).

Image 1.1 a Peacock Banquet
(from https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303206.shtml)

According to Luo (2023), this feast epitomizes “a harmonious celebration of flavors — a medley of sweet, sour, bitter, and spicy”, as well as a harmonious relationship between the Dai culture and nature (n.p.). Such harmony rhetoric has been widely circulated and reiterated in China, especially in sociopolitical discourses concerning ethnic unity (see 2.3.1.1 and 7.2). In this specific case, as Zeng (2019) observes, the harmony rhetoric is underpinned by the Chinese sociopolitical agenda to advance a renewed harmonious human-nature relationship — the Ecological Civilization (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明), in order to construct sustainable economic development (see 7.3.2). This political impetus has gained great currency in ethnic minority areas such as Xishuangbanna, which manifests as concerted governmental, institutional, and individual efforts to protect natural environment and conserve ethnic minority cultures whose traditional practices are perceived as primitive and eco-friendly, or *yuangshengtai* 原生态 in Chinese (see 3.3.2 and 7.3). These efforts have materialized as, such as ethno- and ecotourism, coupled with national and regional environmental protection initiatives. Section 1.2.1.3 showcases how these factors packed in the designing of the Dai culture themed restaurant and my perceptions of ethnic minorities.

1.2.1.3 Semiotic resources mobilized and social system discernible in ethnic culture themed restaurants

I conducted my fieldwork virtually at a Dai themed restaurant in Yunnan out of ethical considerations and sociopolitical concerns (see 5.2.3 and 5.3), a created social space which is characterized with a harmonious human-nature coexistence. This message is embedded in the wall paintings, the interior and exterior decors, the furniture, the ingredients and food presentation, and even the people involved (e.g. those working for and helping design the restaurant) (see Image 1.2).

Image 1.2 the interior decor of DJL

In fact, the restaurant owner — one of the participants — is a Han. The reason why she and her business partners (also Han) run a Dai culture themed restaurant is that they are aware that, with the popularity of ethnic tourism coupled with ecotourism in Yunnan, the traditional cuisine and local ingredients as important ethnic cultural representations have also gained increasing currency in the market. *Ethnic tourism* started with visitors' search for exotic cultural experiences through interacting with distinctive ethnic groups, including the experience or consumption of artifacts,

performances, and other products associated with an ethnic group (Yang & Wall, 2009a:235-236). To meet the demand for ethnic exoticism, ethno-tourism is thus constructed, through displays of ethnic cultural markers and identity, as a special realm in which tourists have opportunities to experience a place, landscape, and ways of life that are different from their own (Cable, 2008).

Since Yunnan began to embrace ethno-tourism in the late 1980s, later joined by ecotourism, joint efforts by national and regional governments, relevant institutions, and the tourist industry have been crafting cultural images of ethnic groups. As one of the earliest and domestically well-known ethnic attractions, Xishuangbanna, later joined by Dehong Dai and Jingpo Autonomous Prefecture, has been displaying the typical features of the Dai culture to domestic and foreign tourists, including Dai bamboo houses, Dai cuisine, Buddhist temples, clothing and hairdressing (Chen, 2014; Li, 2004; Yang, 2011). Against this backdrop, the restaurant creators, with their awareness of ethnic cultures gaining currency in the market and their lived experiences (see Chapter 6), have created the restaurant in question, particularly inspired by the Dai culture and cuisine in Xishuangbanna.

Later while interviewing the participants about their first awareness of the concept of ethnicity, it came to me that my first awareness was actually related to an ethnic minority restaurant. When I was about 6 years old (in 1994), the house on the opposite side to my family house was rent to a Hui (an ethnic minority group who are Muslim) family and turned to a restaurant. The village where I grew up is populated by the Han people, though it is in an Yi autonomous county. The Hui family spoke Chinese and wore similar clothes as we did, but they did not celebrate some of the Chinese traditional festivals as we did and never ate anything cooked by the Han villagers. In China, communal feasting and food sharing are a major part of social life, especially in small communities like villages. Social anthropologists Farb and Amelagos (1980) explained that, based on their studies of many traditional societies including China, such public events “played a role in the maintenance of crucially important networks of collective reciprocity” (in Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999:230). Particularly, as the center of these events, “[f]ood is a shaper of identity and a strong component for social groups, such as family, ethnicity, class or religion” (Chatzopoulou, 2023:6). This might explain why after living in the village for about a decade, the Hui family were always seen as outsiders by the villagers.

In fact, the Hui family also tried to, intentionally or unintentionally, distance themselves from other villagers in a sense. For example, the family mentioned that the food cooked by the Han was not “clean”, which offended the Han villagers, but they never explained what “clean food” meant. Clean food corresponds to *qingzhen* food 清真食品 (literally pure and true) in Chinese, which is a Mandarin expression of the Arabic concept of *halal* (Ding, 2020:17). Note that, in China, *qingzhen* food practices serve as an ethnic marker which not only distinguishes the Hui from the Han but also is associated with the authenticity of ethnic identity within the Hui group (e.g. the “real” or “fake” Hui) (ibid.). Regarding that my Hui neighbours did not bother with an explanation, Unger’s (1997) anthropological study of the ethnic minorities in Yunnan may shed some light on it. Unlike other minority groups who generally perceive their ethnicity as a mark of low social status mainly due to their poverty and low literacy rate, the Hui do not feel inferior to their rural Han neighbours. With a high literacy rate compared with other ethnic groups in Yunnan, the Hui people are known to be more commercially astute and better in husbandry than their Han counterparts. In other words, they enjoy similar, if not higher, socioeconomic status to that of the Han people. Put another way, in China when it comes to ethnic identity and power structure, socioeconomic factors always play a vital role.

In brief, this personal experience of mine resonates with Wu’s (2014) observation that ethnic restaurants “not only provide a window for understanding existing cultural meanings/codes, social relations, identities and power structures, but also serve as transformers for food meanings” (p.159). As such, restaurants and foods have been used to spotlight or blur existing identity boundaries (Wu, 2016a). Echoing Wu, Zhu et al. (2017) also argue that small shops are productive social spaces for a close examination of complex social, cultural, and linguistic (in a broad sense) interactions within larger social contexts (see also Otsuji & Pennycook, 2021, 2023; Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014, 2022).

That means, with my research being relocated in an ethnic minority culture themed restaurant, I am still able to explore the broad questions raised at the beginning of this chapter (see 1.1). In the context of this restaurant, I wonder how the people involved, both Dai and non-Dai, manage to create “authentic” (see 3.3.3 and 7.3.1) Dai culture by using various semiotic resources like languages, food, signage, and objects. More importantly, how do they perceive these resources and signs, and what has given them

the idea that the Dai culture can be marketized and commercialized? And as for the Dai people involved, what are their attitudes towards the commodification of their own culture and language? To answer these questions, I should turn to the interplay between social structure and agency entangled with ethnicity (re)construction in China, which also has navigated this research to where it is now.

1.2.2 The dynamics between agency and structure playing out in ethnicity

This section illustrates how I finally realized, especially as an ethnographer, the impetus to making sense of power relations and socioeconomic as well as political factors intrinsically embedded in social phenomena, including ethnicity.

1.2.2.1 Mediation between individuals and institutional systems in access negotiations

I started my study as an iPhD student in Britain in 2021. The distance from the multi-ethnic region allowed me to reflect on my previous experiences and teaching attempts, and meanwhile it provided me with opportunities to construe them in a different light. Specifically, as my study continued, I began to realise that previously I had tended to position my students and me as their teacher on the opposite to the schools, the education system, and even social mechanisms. For example, I perceived the limited access given to the students as an epitome of individuals being oppressed by an unfair power structure, and hence I saw myself as a shield (instead of a mediator) blocking as much impingement of the system on my students as possible. With such perceptions, whenever sensing that the students were impinged, I felt empathetic but more frustrated, especially with the gradual realization that I could not actually make any difference. As a result, for many times I found myself, along with my colleagues and students, criticizing that situation but continuing to live with it.

Bhaskar (1980), by distinguishing *explanatory critique* from *criticism*, points out that if the critical condition alone is satisfied, it immediately leads to a negative evaluation of practices and of resultant actions (i.e. criticizing), and it may surely, intentionally or unintentionally, impact but remain silent on “the (causal) conditions of actions, the springs (so to speak) of belief and behaviour, the sources of determination” (p.22). In my

case, for example, I always assumed that social mechanisms indicated constraints on individuals and therefore believed that the relationship between them was dichotomous, though I did not note how this assumption was shaped. As a result, whenever there were any perceived conflicts between social systems and individuals, my sense of self was strengthened and I fought back immediately (e.g. complaining, criticizing, refusing to conform), without making any effort to understand what caused the said conflicts, let alone figure out whether the conflicts were reconcilable or not. Unsurprisingly, for many times, the conflicts turned out not to be an either-or situation. My application for ethical approval when I started my PhD research is a case in point.

During my ethical approval application, I was required to revise my application several times, concerning ethnicity as a sensitive research topic and the issues of international data transfer that the Chinese government forbids and of cyber security while conducting fieldwork in China (see 5.3.3). In other words, I was stuck between two irreconcilable systems, at least "irreconcilable" in the sense of *individual agency* — "a socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn, 2001:112). Put another way, I was "positioned differently" (Khan, 2005, in Day, 2012:73), on the one hand, by the Chinese government and relevant institutions as a researcher based overseas — an outsider, despite my Chinese nationality — an insider, whose research is perceived as a potential risk for national and ethnic unity; and on the other, by the British institution as an eligible research student who must commit herself to ethics and integrity in research. That said, later it turns out that, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) observe, marginality in social position and in perspective, voluntarily or not, helps ethnographers to approach and understand the social phenomena from within and as external to the researchers themselves, that is, as natural phenomena.

I did not learn this lesson until my request for permission was rejected by the institution where I had worked for four years. The university could not grant me permission because my research was regarding ethnic minority groups, which raised its concern for ethnic harmony and concerns over transnational data collection and use. At that moment it struck me that I was stuck in my past experiences and that the institutional settings already became a comfort zone to me. That means, what really made me panic regarding the refusal was that after all these years of being a member of the institutional system, I thought, more precisely in LeCompte and Schensul's (2010) words, I *deluded*

myself into thinking that I knew how to play by its rules, but I was actually rejected by it. The realization gave me quite a shock, but it also forced me to think out of the box.

My old perspectives were largely anchored in educational and institutional settings. In fact, I have never left school — an ivory tower to some extent — as a student or a teacher, since I started my schooling at 5 years old. In this sense, I am only an insider of a certain community, more precisely, a certain *ideological group* in van Dijk's (2006) words. That is, as a long-term member of educational institutions, I identify, consciously or not, with this social group which has its shared ideological beliefs and discourses. Quite different from me, my participants are from different walks of life. Although they are also aware of the sociopolitical changes in the society, they choose to understand and practically adapt to what has happened and is happening. It is not necessarily to say that they are more submissive, but their life is more directly involved in the social changes, compared with me and those always in the ivory tower.

In sum, the access negotiation process, though painful, has made me realize how sensitive my research topic — or more precisely how sensitive *the causal assumptions attached to discourses of ethnicity* — could be, especially in the Chinese context. For this reason, I had no choice but to conduct my fieldwork remotely from the U.K.. That is, I contacted the participants, collected data from them, and interviewed them by using Micro Teams and Outlook email, instead of physically visiting the Dai culture themed restaurant myself and gathering data in person (see 5.2). Moreover, during this process, I realized that the socioeconomic context in that region could foster my understanding of ethnicity (see 1.2.2.2).

1.2.2.2 Turning to socioeconomic reality

In my second year as a volunteer teacher working in the multi-ethnic township in Yunnan, all the schoolteachers were required to conduct home visits because of the continuous high dropout rates in that region. On one Friday evening, my colleagues and I gathered in the school and teamed up for the home visits. For one thing, we could only meet with the students' parents at night because they always worked in the farm field during the daytime. For another, we could reach the students' houses only by riding motorbikes, because many of the students and their family were living in the mountains

and there were no roads for vehicles. Note that in that multi-ethnic region, the Han and the Dai are river-valley dwellers while other minority groups commonly live in the mountains (a similar observation about the multi-ethnic community in Xishuangbanna made by Henin & Flaherty, 1994) — an implicit hierarchy long existing within the multi-ethnic community.

For safety consideration, we needed to pair up. When we arrived at the village leader's house at the bottom of the mountain, it was already dark. From there, each pair of the teachers riding a motorbike headed to the mountains separately. There were no road lights on the way, and the only light was from the motorbike headlight. That might be the reason why during the home visits I felt that I was in a dream, and everything was so blurry to me. I did not say a word during the visits mainly because of a language barrier. I just sat quietly in different houses and let my colleague, a Dai, do all the talking. To be honest, I do not think I heard anything they said. All I remember is their moving lips in the dim light without any sound, as if I was watching a black and white silent film.

When we got out from the last house, it was already around eleven at night and we were on the mountain top. On our way back, it was literally pitch-dark. Sitting behind my colleague's back, I could not see anything. In addition, except insect sounds and the sharp sounds from the motorbike's tyres crunching stones, it was dead silent. I dared not to look back, but I was not sure what I was terrified of. Upon stepping into my door, I could not hold my tears any longer. It was not the fear of darkness that crushed me but the shock from facing poverty so closely. Certainly, I had seen real poverty before, because I myself grew up in a small and poor village. Nevertheless, the experience at that night gave me a quite different shock, because it reminded me of primitivity.

Spurred by various shocks that I experienced during the five years at the township, I kept a writing journal. I named the journal *fangniuban rizhi* 放牛班日志 (literally, Diaries about My Choristers), which was inspired by the French film *Les Choristes* (*The Chorus*). That means, in a sense, my students were also a group of "troubled" teenagers. They were good kids but most of them just did not see the point of formal schooling. Put another way, they were practical. For example, they offered me jobs to work in the local rubber farm parks, when they found out how little I earned as a volunteer teacher. The funny thing is that even some of my colleagues referred to me as a case in point when they agreed with the students that formal education was not the only way out. I had

graduated from a top university in Yunnan and was studying for a master's degree then but ended up working in the remotest area on a low income. It was not surprising that I was always seen as an outsider, a misfit sometimes, in that township and in that school. Comparatively, I think the reason why the students were close to me is that they were kids and I was a childish dreamer. That is how people generally saw me for many years.

Looking back, I think they were right about me being a naive idealist. Back then I did think I could relate to my students and wishfully believed that I could encourage them to pursue their dreams. However, obviously I did not know exactly what "dreams" meant to them, because I never really walked close enough to understand the everyday reality facing them but instead always acting like an outsider, observing them, taking note (e.g. my writing journal), and interpreting everything from my own perspective. That was also the time when I started aligning myself with the students — the vulnerable group in my eyes — and criticizing the educational system. Karl Marx (1965) pointed out that criticism "knows how to judge and condemn the present, but not how to comprehend it" (p.505, in Bhaskar, 1980:22). In other words, "it employs value (and particularly, although contingently, moral) terms in the absence of any kind of causal grounding" and therefore cannot be intrinsically emancipatory (ibid.).

This memory did not come to my mind until during the ethical approval application when I read an article about the cheerleading team of the university which I planned to conduct my research. This team was formed in 2017 and since then the coach has been attempting to integrate different ethnic cultural elements in Yunnan into their routines. That means, like *jueban* woodcut print, the cheerleading team has mobilized various semiotic resources in that region. In the article, the interview with the team coach struck me deeply. According to the coach, many students at the university are from remote mountainous areas and lack the opportunity to see the outside world. The coach recalls that, on their trip to compete in Shanghai, when arriving at the international airport, one of the students turned to him and "he said that if he weren't in Shanghai with me, the most possible reason for him to visit the metropolis would be as a migrant worker seeking work opportunities" (Xing, 2022, n.p.)[6]. This interview made me realize that, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) remind me, I did not really understand the social reality, especially the socioeconomic situations facing the multi-ethnic groups in Yunnan, from within. With this reminder, I have anchored my research to both

individuals' multi-semiotic practices and perceptions and the social condition in which they engage in their everyday life.

1.2.3 Summary

Looking back on my PhD research journey, since some unnoticed point, I have begun to see myself as a mediator instead of a shield anymore. That means, I do not necessarily position myself in opposition to social and institutional systems. Rather, I manage to mediate between myself — as an agentive individual — and social systems, based on a full comprehension (if possible) of the social conditions, as suggested by Bhaskar (1980). To this end, the distanced position from the place which I am familiar with allows me to make sense of the complexities of the social context, and meanwhile my research provides me with a close look at "the messiness and meaning making of everyday life at the level of specific individuals and groups" (Pitt, 2010:184). The distance and the closeness at the same time help me aware that what is normatively represented and perceived as individual, personal, normal should instead be understood as historically constituted, culturally produced, politically oriented, and socially maintained and/or resisted (Rimke, 2010). That is, a social constructionist perspective of social phenomena, such as ethnicity (see Chapter 2).

1.3 Structure of the thesis

This thesis explores how various semiotic resources including languages, artefacts, natural materials, etc. in a multiethnic region are mobilized at an ethnic minority culture themed restaurant in Yunnan, China, to produce creative designs, such as wall paintings, signage, interior and exterior decors, and culinary arts. This study interprets the multi-semiotic practices of the people involved, including their interpreting, using, recreating, relocating, and (re)assembling the semiotic resources and signs available at the restaurant. To unpack the interplay between agency and structure entangled in ethnicity (re)construction, it also examines the social context and traces how the social mechanisms shape the microlevel multi-semiotic practices, semiotic (re)assemblages, and people's perceptions. To do so, the thesis is organized in the following way.

Chapter Two explains what ethnicity is from a social constructionist perspective especially in the Chinese context. Then it traces the (re)construction of ethnicity and the emergence of *hanyu*-dominated language ideology in China through a sociohistorical review and unpacks how this language ideology is underpinned by the Confucian harmony discourse of unity in diversity. This review and the socially-(re)constructed ethnicity in contemporary China have revealed two themes packed in ethnic (re)construction — the multi-semiotic nature of ethnic markers and their entanglement with the structure-agency dynamics, which buttresses my reflections in 1.2. Moreover, it justifies the social constructionist epistemology that this research adopts.

Chapter Three reviews relevant ethnicity studies in China, regarding language ideologies and choices, multi-semiotic markers of ethnicity and their entanglement with the political-economic market in current China. It finds that most research gives scarce attention to structure-agency dynamics or simply dichotomize them. Moreover, given that cultural and natural resources, among which languages may or may not be included, are foregrounded to represent ethnic minority groups in contemporary China, to understand and interpret ethnicity, this chapter argues that a social semiotic approach coupled with an ethnographic lens is needed to examine ethnic cultural representations and practices which are socially constructed.

Chapter Four elucidates how social semiotics, with its capacity to attend to semiosis and the agency-structure dynamics embedded in these practices, serves the purpose to explore ethnicity. Then it elaborates on the theoretical framework compounded of social semiotics and constructionist ethnography, which is adopted to interpret various semiotic resources and signs mobilised to represent ethnic culture and identity and examine the social forces and actors entangled in ethnicity (re)construction. To contextualize this framework, this chapter demonstrates the sociocultural, political, economic and historical contexts of Yunnan, coupled with an illustration of the exemplary Dai community Xishuangbanna. Building on the sociohistorical and literature reviews in Chapters Two and Three and this theoretical framework, the chapter concludes by specifying research questions, concerning semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers, the (re)construction of ethnic culture and identity, and the dynamics between agency and structure playing out in ethnicity (re)construction in China.

Chapter Five elucidates sociosemiotic ethnography as a methodological approach and then explains why remote sociosemiotic ethnography, compared with other language-related ethnography (e.g. linguistic ethnography, linguistic anthropology), better serves the purpose of this research. Following that, this chapter sets out the fieldwork, initial coding, and the complementary analytical methods, namely, a critical analysis of signs (CASs) and a critical discourse analysis (CDA). It also discusses the limitations of the methodology and research trustworthiness.

Chapter Six ethnographically depicts the Dai culture themed restaurant as a semiotic product/assemblage and the making of it. It also analyses various semiotic resources and signs as ethnic identifiers at the restaurant through the lens of social semiotics. It focuses on how indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs and other semiotic resources (natural and cultural ones) are resemiotized and (re)assembled at the restaurant to represent the Dai culture and its natural habitat. By exploring the design of the restaurant, this chapter finds that the Dai cultural resources and signs mobilized at the restaurant maintain certain ethnic meaning for authentication but meanwhile are altered and resemiotized when relocated and (re)assembled at the restaurant. It has also found that the multi-semiotic practices, the resemiotization process, and the designed semiotic (re)assemblages at the restaurant mobilize accessible semiotic resources and signs and involve various individuals' agency, which is under the influence of the sociocultural system. Based on the findings, this chapter argues that the design and resemiotization of signs and semiotic resources and (re)assemblages rest on both social actors' agency and perceptions and accord with the sociocultural system of the context in which the resemiotized signs and the designed semiotic (re)assemblages can make meaning and sense.

In Chapter Seven, CDA is used to examine the intricate dynamics between individuals' practices and perceptions and the provincial and national policy and agenda underpinned by particular ideologies. Specifically, through the lens of CDA, this chapter explores how food-related metaphors in relation to ethnicity are translated and reformulated as sociopolitical metaphors, which are tailored to the specific political-economic circumstances in contemporary China. In has found that the translation process involves multiscale forces and actors. To examine the multiscale interplay, CDA is used to trace how the individuals' multi-semiotic practices and perceptions of various cultural and natural resources as ethnic markers are entangled with the

(re)construction of ethnicity at the provincial and national levels. It also examines how individuals' claims for ethnic minority identities are intertwined with the provincial identity (re)construction. Building on these analyses, this chapter concludes by arguing that both provincial/regional and individual identification result from the complicated interplay between social structures and individual agency. Moreover, it argues that the multiscale and multidimensional interplay in ethnicity reconstruction is underpinned by the Confucian tradition of harmony discourses — ethnic diversity embedded in national unity — and by the development-oriented ideologies materialized as the state's political-economic agendas.

Chapter Eight summaries the general structure and the key points of the thesis and then revisits the research questions. It shows that the integration of ethnopolitics and ecopolitics into the (re)construction of ethnicity in contemporary China, which is fuelled by political-economic agendas and the market and underpinned by development-oriented ideologies, gives birth to a new version of ethnicity with Chinese characteristics — *eco-ethnicity*. Following that, this chapter reflects on the sociosemiotic approach to ethnicity and the ethnographic stance taken in this research, with elaborations on theoretical and methodological contributions, and personal implications of my research journey. This chapter also identifies the limitations of this research and ends with suggestions for future research, especially those to be conducted in the increasingly multi-semiotic world which is constructed through structure-agency dynamics.

Chapter 2 Ethnicity in the social constructionist paradigm

2.1 Introduction

If semiotic resources and signs are taken to be expressive of meanings, it is necessary to investigate how they come to play their emergent social roles in or are excluded from making meaning and sense within a particular sociohistorical formation. In Keane's (2005) words, "we must be prepared to ask under what historical circumstances, and guided by what semiotic ideology, that is possible" (p.195). This research sees ethnicity is (re)constructed in a particular social context which mobilizes various semiotic resources and signs and involves agency and social systems within that context. That means, aligning with Keane (2005), an investigation of the formation of semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers is a good starting point for this research. This chapter starts with conceptualization of ethnicity within the social constructionist paradigm. It then explores ethnicity in the Chinese context, which is followed by a historical review of the sociopolitical context and an exploration of the underlying ideology.

2.2 A social constructionist explanation of ethnicity

This section discusses different approaches to ethnicity, with its focus on a social constructionist perspective, which is the stance that this research takes. For an elaboration, section 2.2.2 unpacks the social constructionism which this research adopts. Then section 2.2.3 contextualizes and explores the concept of ethnicity in China.

2.2.1 What is ethnicity?

The word *ethnic* originates from the Greek word *ethnos* (nation), which was an apolitical term referring to the unity of persons of common descent: a people (Cornell &

Hartmann, 1998; Fenton, 2010). That means, originally it was a primordial explanation. When this word first used in English in the 15th century, it indicated someone neither Christian nor Jew, namely a pagan or an "other". By the 20th century, the reference of this term to religion was gone and *ethnicity* was used as a specific way to define both "others" and "us" (Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; MacCannell, 1984). That is when this term entered sociology. For example, Weber (1968), foregrounding the political attribute of ethnicity, referred ethnic groups as "human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration [...] whether or not an objective blood relationship exists" (p.389, in Cornell & Hartmann, 1998:17). Viewed in this light, ethnicity is more prescribed and fixed than being dynamic and fluid (see Shneiderman & Amburgey, 2022). That said, Weber recognized ethnicity being subjectively, socially, historically, politically, culturally, and/or biologically constructed. Similarly, Schermerhorn (1978) defined an ethnic group as a self-conscious "collectivity within a larger society having real or putative common ancestry, memories of a shared historical past, and a cultural focus on one or more symbolic elements defined as the epitome of their peoplehood" (p.12, in Cornell & Hartmann, 1998:19). The prominent symbolic elements include geographical location, kinship patterns, religious affiliation, language, and physical characteristics.

To illustrate, the role of geographic location plays in ethnic identity formation can be explained by the concept of *geographical imagination*. Derek Gregory defines geographical imagination as "the complex of culturally and historically situated geographical knowledge and understanding that characterizes a certain social group" (Cosgrove & della Dora, 2005:388, in Gieseking, 2017:3). As such, it

> enables the individual to recognize the role of space and place in his [sic] own biography, to relate to the spaces he sees around him, and to recognize how transactions between individuals and between organizations are affected by the space that separates them. It allows him to recognize the relationship which exists between him and his neighborhood, his territory, [...] to judge the relevance of events in other places [..., and] to fashion and use space creatively and to appreciate the meaning of the spatial forms created by others (Harvey, 1973a). (Harvey, 2005:212; see 7.4 for exemplification)

In sum, the concept of *ethnicity*, in MacCannell's (1984) words, takes up "the conceptual space between bio-genetic ideas of race and socio-genetic ideas of culture" (p.378) demarcated by ethnic-group insiders' self-consciousness (and outsiders' perception).

Despite the recognized constitutive elements of ethnicity, the undertone of the above arguments is that ethnicity mainly relies on self-defined boundaries and internal processes, which relegates the society to just a background. Such an interpretation of ethnicity, as Nagel (1994) observes, runs the risk of spotlighting agency while overshadowing structure. That is why, from a social constructionist perspective, Nagel argues that the construction of ethnicity involves a dialect played out by both ethnic individuals/groups and external social, economic, and political processes and agents. It is the result of a dialectical process in the sense that it involves internal and external processes, along with the ethnic insiders' self-definition and outsiders' designations. Put simply, it results from the interplay between agency and structure. Viewed in this light, ethnicity is best understood as fluid, dynamic, contextual, volitional, and contested (Nagel, 1994). Echoing Nagel, Fenton (2010) defines *ethnicity* as *social identities* which derive from "the *social construction* of descent and culture, the social mobilization of descent and culture and the meanings and implications of classification systems built around them" (p.3, originally emphasized).

A case in point is the Ethnic Classification project (*minzu shibie* 民族识别) at the inception of the People's Republic of China (the PRC). The classification was based on four major criteria formulated by Stalin, including a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture (Mullaney, 2004, 2010; Tapp, 2002; Zhou, 2011). This project was initiated to respond to the *Election Law* issued in 1953 specifying that each *minzu* 民族(see 2.2.3)/ethnic group should be represented in the National People's Congress (Mullaney, 2004). That means, to be recognized was assumed to officially become a member of the Chinese nationality family and automatically be granted with equal political, economic, social, and cultural rights (Ma, 2010; Yang, 2009) — "ethnically-designated rights and resources" (Nagel, 1994:158). In this sense, the project was fundamentally a politicizing practice toward ethnicity (Ma, 2010). It explains why in Yunnan, given its complexity of the ethnic situation, more than 260 ethnic groups applied to be identified. Yet only 25 minority groups were officially recognized when the project ended in 1987, leaving some groups

being categorized into the designated ones or still waiting to be identified (Yang, 2009). In sum, although this national project is widely seen as state-manipulated (e.g. Mullaney, 2004), in practice it was the result of the alignment of the state, local and regional governments, relevant institutions (e.g. universities, hospitals) and agents (e.g. anthropologists, linguists), and local ethnic elites (Brown, 2001; Mullaney, 2010; Tapp, 2002; Yang, 2009). In brief, ethnic identities during this project were (re)constructed by the ethnic minority insiders and external structures of power and agents.

Following this nationwide project, the economic reforms in the 1980s and the opening of the tourist market in China including heritage tourism and ethnic tourism since the 1990s, later joined by ecotourism especially in southwest China and China's more active engagement in the global flows of political economy (e.g. Luo, 2018a, 2018b; Jin, 2023; Oakes, 1993, 1997, 2000; Xu et al., 2005; Xu & Salas, 2003), have constantly fuelled and further complicated ethnicity (re)construction. Aware of the complexity regarding ethnicity in contemporary China, this research prominently aligns with Nagel's (1994) and Fenton's (2010) social constructionist conceptualization of ethnicity. That means, apart from inquiring into individuals' agency, I also pay close attention to the social, historical, economic, political, and geographic dimensions of ethnic culture and identity (re)construction. Before exploring the Chinese interpretation of ethnicity, the following section elaborates on social constructionism in the light of meaning- and sensemaking.

2.2.2 A social constructionist perspective

Social constructionism emphasizes that

> *all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world* [both natural and social]*, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context* (Crotty,1998:42, originally emphasized).

"The 'social' in social constructionism is about the mode of meaning generation [and transmission…,] for the meanings with which we are endowed arise in and out of interactive human community" (ibid., p.55). In this sense, social constructionism

concerns with meaning- and sensemaking, especially the social and cultural origins of meaning which involve the interplay between society, culture, meaning- and sensemaking subjects, the objects for and in meaning-making, and specific contexts. Social constructionism thus sees meaning- and sensemaking as the central feature of human practices (Crotty, 1998; Lock & Strong, 2010).

Specifically, meaning making relies on the practice of making sense/interpretation, and sensemaking is sustained by meaning-makers' meaningfully using signs/*encoding* and by interpreters at the other end making sense of/*decoding* the meaning (Hall, 1997). That means, for social constructionists, meaning and interpretation derive from social interaction and shared agreements regarding what symbolic forms and practices should be taken to be (Hall, 1997; Lock & Strong, 2010). In this sense, meaning- and sensemaking are inherently entangled in sociocultural systems, as well as being time-and-place specific (Burr, 2015; Crotty, 1998; Lock & Strong, 2010). Given this understanding, social constructionists commit to "delineating the processes that operate in the socio-cultural conduct of action to produce the *discourses* within which people construe themselves" (Lock & Strong, 2010; emphasized by me).

Notably, this research adopts van Leeuwen's (2005, 2008, 2015) definition of discourses, which is underpinned by a Foucauldian perspective (see also 5.4.2.2). Specifically, they are socially constructed knowledges which are "constituted by and operating through language and other symbolic systems" (Burr, 2015:21). In this sense, discourses are socially shared and have implications for social action and thus bounded up with certain power relations. Given this stance, van Leeuwen (2005, 2008, 2015) argues that discourses are essentially modelled on social practices and also "*transform* these practices in ways which safeguard the interests at stake in a given social context" (2005:104, originally emphasized). That means, discourses are recontextualizations of social practices and also "*context-specific frameworks for making sense of things*" (ibid., p.138, originally emphasized). In this sense, it involves both *macro* and *micro* social constructionist understandings.

Micro social constructionism locates social constructing processes within everyday discourse between people in interaction, in which if power is referred to, it is taken to be an effect of discourse. By contrast, *macro social constructionism* acknowledges the role of language and other symbols in social construction but sees it as embedded in

social structures, power relations, and institutionalised practices (e.g. Burr, 2015; Lock & Strong, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005, 2008, 2015). Despite the distinction, the two versions of constructionism are not mutually exclusive. Instead, Wetherell (1998) argues that in our research it is necessary to take account of both the situated nature of social interactions and the institutional practices and social structures within which these interactions are constructed (in Burr, 2015:25). Echoing them, this research inquiries into social constructions taking place across multiple scales. Specifically, it attends to the socially constructed ethnicity, which is (re)constructed in an entangled process of meaning- and sensemaking (e.g. Abes et al., 2007; Takei, 2020), fusing multiscale actors and forces within a given social context. That means, to unpack socially constructed ethnicity, it is necessary to understand the social context in which the construction takes place and therefore the attached meaning to ethnicity makes sense.

2.2.3 Conceptualization of ethnicity in China

The terminology debate regarding *ethnicity* in China is still ongoing. In the mid-1800s, the concept of ethnicity was first introduced to China (Ma, 2014). The Chinese term *minzu* (民族) as its referent derived from the Japanese neologism *minzoku*, which was coined to translate the German word *Volk* (Elliott, 2015; Ma, 2010). There are three indications embedded in the Chinese notion of *minzu*: nation, ethnic group (ethnicity)/nationality, and minority group (Elliot, 2015; Ma, 2010, 2014). That means, it bears two levels of connotation: being political and territorial, and being cultural (Ma, 2010:32). Regarding the indication of a nation — a political entity, *Zhonghua minzu* 中华民族 (a Chinese national group — the Chinese nation) is a case in point. This term is underpinned by the idea that the PRC is constituted of a single and unified *Chinese people* that comprise fifty-six ethnic groups and are bound together as a political entity (Elliot, 2015; Ma, 2010). Another term embodying both the meanings of nation and ethnic group is *shijuminzu* 世居民族 (literally heritage-resident ethnicities).This term presupposes that the fifty-six ethnic groups including the Han have always been regarded as native to Chinese territory by the Chinese state. That is, all Chinese citizens are members of *shiju minzu* — “the eponymous people of a given autonomous region or

zone who for generations have been considered to be inhabitants of the territory" (Elliott, 2015:212).

Note that *shijuminzu* is both a cultural and political term. On the one hand, it is meant to shy away from the political debate facing the concept of indigenous/aboriginal people; but on the other, it serves to maintain national and ethnic unity — China being a unified polyethnic country since its unification in Qin dynasty (see Fei, 1988), a political goal. According to Luo (2018a, 2018b), the term *shijuminzu* adopted by the Chinese state, instead of indigenous peoples — a social and political category (Jung, 2008, in Hathaway, 2010:303), is meant to deviate from historically and politically contested issues regarding rights and justice undergirded by the indigeneity discourse. The politicized notion of indigeneity denotes historic continuity, cultural purity, self-identity, and environmental sensibility (Dove, 2006), which endeavours to make political claims for indigenous people and social justice (Elliott, 2015).

In terms of the indications of ethnicity and minority group, the English equivalent of *minzu* is either nationality or ethnic group/ethnicity. Accordingly, the Chinese expression *shaoshu minzu* 少数民族 is translated either as minority nationalities or minority ethnic groups/ethnic minorities (e.g. Ma, 2007, 2010, 2014). In the early 2000s, the terminology shifted from nationalities as the equivalent of *minzu* to ethnic groups/ethnic minorities, to distinguish it from *Zhonghua minzu*/the Chinese nation (Elliot, 2015; Ma, 2007, 2014). More recently, with an effort to distinguish the political undertone of ethnicity terminology from the anthropological and sociological ones, more importantly to distinguish ethnicity in the Chinese context from the Western interpretation, the term *minzu* per se has become commonly used (e.g. Elliot, 2015; Ma, 2007, 2010; Oakes, 1997). This shift indicates a recognition of *minzu* or *ethnicity with Chinese characteristics*, which was mainly (re)constructed through the Ethnic Classification project (see 2.2.1).

In this sense, the notion of *minzu* in China is different from ethnicity in the Western concept. That is, *minzu*, on the one hand, depends on assigned and fixed categories to classify ethnic groups — a primordial approach to ethnicity, which treats boundaries between ethnic groups as clear-cut and enduring based on particular constitutive characteristics like cultures, languages, ancestries, and histories (Ma, 2010); on the other, it has emerged from the interplay of social actors and forces including the state,

governments and institutions, and agents. As such, *minzu* or ethnicity with Chinese characteristics features both primordial attachment and sociopolitical imprint. For this reason, Ma (e.g. 2007, 2010) claims that in the real world, especially in contemporary society, any ethnic group within a given country is both a cultural and political group. The major difference lies in which ethnic attributes are emphasized or diluted, the cultural or the political ones. To further this line of argument, this thesis argues that ethnic minority groups in China, especially since the Ethnic Classification project, have been socio-politically reconstructed though with certain cultural attributes maintained.

Notably, out of the concerns with ethnic tensions given rise by the political undertone of ethnicity/ethnic groups and *minzu* in modern China, apolitical terminology is proposed. For example, some scholars define primarily culturally formed ethnic groups as *zuqun* 族群 (e.g. Ma, 2007, 2010, 2014; Wang, 2020). In ethnology, *zuqun* refers to a collectivity who are geographically linked, linguistically similar, and of the same ancestry with shared culture and history (Ma, 2010). Moreover, according to Ma (2010), *zuqun*, for one thing, is not like *minzu,* the latter of which has been attached with socioeconomic and political values by sociopolitical agendas like the Ethnic Classification project and hence more precisely are socio-politically reconstructed ethnic interest groups; for another, *zuqun* is distinguished from and more importantly helps to consolidate another Chinese expression — *Zhonghua minzu* (see also Elliot, 2015). Given this argumentation, the term *zuqun* is proposed to depoliticize ethnic identity in contemporary China, that is, a shift from *minzu*-nationality to *zuqun*-ethnicity. However, unlike the other apolitical term *shijuminzu*, such a depoliticalized approach to ethnicity is largely criticized by both university academics and government officials (Elliot, 2015; Ma, 2014).

That said, look closely and one can notice that the sociopolitical agendas carried out in contemporary China (see 2.3.1.2) echo Ma's (e.g. 2007, 2010, 2014) proposal to *culturalize* ethnicity. This approach is premised on political and legal equality and rights among all groups, which fundamentally serves to strengthen the Chinese national identity (i.e. a political and unified identity) of all ethnic groups. That means, the culturalization-oriented approach to managing ethnic identity and relations, in Ma's (2007) own words, helps to achieve three fundamental goals — "political unity, ethnic equality and cultural diversity" (p.215). That is, a win-win-win situation. Yet, notably, the

culturalization of ethnicity can only be achieved within the context of a larger socio-political system.

Despite the terminology debate, given the fact that national and regional policies regarding ethnicity have remained fundamentally unchanged since the Ethnic Classification project, this thesis aligns with Fei Xiaotong's (1988) — one of the leading scholars engaged in the project — definition of the Chinese people and accordingly adopts the terms ethnic groups and ethnic minority groups. Specifically, *the Chinese people* refer to the population of over one billion within the peripheries of China's territory including *fifty-six ethnic groups*, who have *the unified consciousness of a nationality* (Fei, 1988:167, emphasized by me). Although the terms nationality and ethnic groups were used interchangeably in Fei's writing, this definition of the Chinese people resonates with the fundamental arguments discussed above. That is, nationality indicates a national level of identification while ethnicity/ethnic groups connote group-level identities within a country. Equally importantly, given this alignment, this thesis also recognizes the socially constructed nature of ethnicity in contemporary China. To better understand how this nation-ethnicity framework has formed, developed, and reframed in Chinese history, section 2.3.1 sets out a historical review of ethnicity-related policies and ideologies.

2.2.4 Summary

This section has reviewed a social constructionist understanding of ethnicity, following which it has identified that in contemporary China ethnicity is also socially (re)constructed. Building on this line of argumentation, this thesis approaches and interprets ethnicity in the Chinese context through a social constructionist lens. Additionally, it adopts the term ethnic (minority) groups and recognizes that ethnicity in China is socio-politically reconstructed but with certain cultural attributes maintained. For a better understanding of the Chinese version of ethnicity, the following section reviews the configuration and reconfiguration of the Chinese people in history. Moreover, to gain insight into the reconstructed ethnicity in contemporary China, it examines ethnic policies, particularly in terms of language management.

2.3 Ethnic (re)construction in the Chinese context

This section reviews the formation and reconstruction of the nation-ethnic structure of political unity and ethnic diversity, along with a critical review of relevant political agenda and ideologies.

2.3.1 Historical, political, and ideological background of ethnic (re)construction

The PRC has an overall population of over 1.4 billion people, among whom around 1.3 billion are Han people, accounting for 91.1%, while the number of the ethnic minorities is 125.47 million. Compared with 2010, the population of the latter groups grew by 10.26%, much higher than that of the Han (4.93%) (National Bureau of Statistics, 2021)[7]. According to Wu and Ingram (2019), with the economic reforms and the different implementation of various policies since 1980s, such as one-child policy mainly targeting the Han and preferential policies for ethnic minorities, the population growth of minority groups has been faster than that of the Han. Note that Chinese citizens are allowed, if requirement is met, to shift their ethnic status mainly between Han ethnicity and minority ethnicity. Ethnic status is officially required to be registered in every Chinese citizen's *hukoubu* 户口簿 (household register) and appears on their *shenfenzheng* 身份证 (national identity card). For example, since 1980s when the college admission requirements were lowered officially for ethnic minority students, many teenagers have identified themselves as a member of ethnic minorities if one of their parents belongs to a minority group (Brown, 2001; Ma, 2007; Kendall, 2017; Unger, 1997; Wu & Ingram, 2019):

> (Article 71) In enrolment, institutions of higher education and secondary technical schools shall appropriately set lower standards and requirements for the admission of students from minority nationalities, and special consideration shall be given to the admission of students from minority nationalities with thin populations. (the *Law of the People's Republic of China on Regional Ethnic Autonomy*,1984/2001)[8]

In brief, these sociopolitical policies have further complicated ethnic identity and ethnic relations in China. One case in point is the current debate about culturally or

linguistically “authentic/genuine” and “fake” ethnic minority status (e.g. Kendall, 2017; Luo, 2018b; Yang, 2018).

For example, Kendall (2017) has identified new ethnicity criteria adopted by the local people in Kaili of Guizhou Province, a multi-ethnic minority region in Southwest China. That is, the “fake” ethnic populace “was the product of an urban and modern lifestyle and no longer spoke the language or practiced the customs of their official *minzu* category” (p.103). With the geographic location as the core, these criteria give rise to an urban-rural ethnic dichotomy. That is, the city produces “fake” ethnic minorities, while the rural produces real ones. This dichotomy denotes a socio-spatial hierarchy, in which urbanity is modern and Han while ethnic minorities coupled with rurality are economic backward (p.105). That means, the socio-spatial and socioeconomic tone of ethnicity becomes much louder and accordingly ethnic membership is largely externally and situationally instead of bio-culturally designated, at least in this specific case.

That said, language remains the primary focus of the ethnicity debate in China. For example, as one of the major classification criteria of the ethnic minority classification, minority languages particularly the writing systems were reformed. In 1952, when preparing for the classification project, linguist Fu Maoyong and his team surveyed in Yunnan and helped create 14 ethnic minority scripts (Yang, 2009). In addition, due to the cross-provincial distribution of ethnic groups, in some cases, more than one script and spoken language was created for a single group, such as the Miao using four languages and the Dai using four writing systems (Dai & Cheng, 2007; Zhou, 2011). Unsurprisingly, now except *Putonghua* and seven major varieties of Chinese/*fangyan* 方言 — Mandarin, *Wu*, *Min* (e.g. Teochew), *Yue* (Cantonese), *Xiang*, *Gan*, and *Kejia* (Hakka) (Gil, 2021; Zhang, 2013), around 130 languages are used by the ethnic minority groups (Adamson & Feng, 2021), with the exception of a few ethnic groups like the Hui and the Manchu who have adopted Mandarin as their home language (Dai & Cheng, 2007).

Viewing the language diversity through the lens of language planning and policy in China, Adamson and Feng (2009) have identified three goals of the national language policies: “to enhance literacy, to assure internal stability and to allow knowledge transfer in order to strengthen the nation” (p.330). Similarly, the language policies and education for ethnic minorities also aim to stabilize the country and narrow the socioeconomic gaps between the minority regions and the eastern coastal and central

areas populated mainly by the Han people (Adamson & Feng, 2009, 2021; Shen et al., 2021)[1]. Specifically, minority language policies serve to legitimize the language rights of minority groups in autonomous regions; to allow the use of minority languages and protect diverse minority cultural resources; to construct minority languages as a complement which serves the national common language to build a harmonious and balance language diversity; and to maintain national unity, social stability, identity across minority groups, and border security (border areas in China largely populated by ethnic minorities) (Huang, 2019, in Wu, et al., 2022:2). Put simply, *Putonghua* as the linguistic foundation of a unified country and the complementary role of ethnic minority languages to harmonize ethnic diversity are foregrounded.

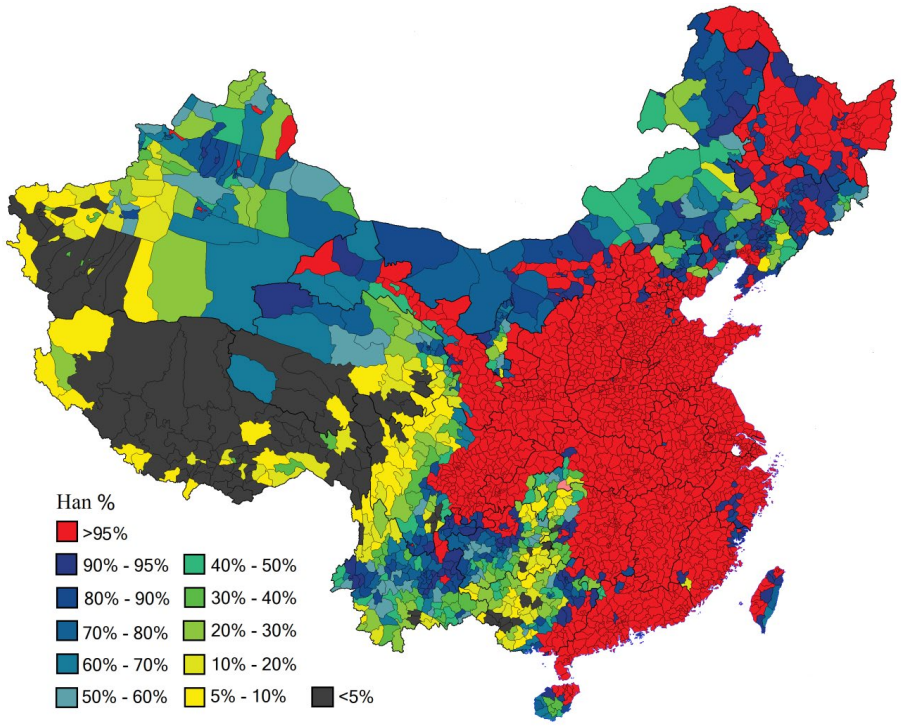

Image 2.1 Percentage map of China – the Han People

For a better understanding of the dominance-complementation relationship between *Putonghua* and ethnic minority languages, sections 2.3.1.1 and 2.3.1.2 examine the underlying logic for such a relationship and trace its formation process particularly in the case of language ideology.

[1] See Image 2.1 for the population distribution of the Han and ethnic minorities, which is originally captioned "Percentage map of China – ethnic Han People", available on virtualmirage.org/integrity/ (Accessed: November 21st, 2023).

2.3.1.1 Unity and diversity in official Chinese policy

A recurrent theme of the harmony discourses, on which the sociopolitical structure of China (e.g. the dynamics between the Han and ethnic minority groups) is largely premised, is the argument that diversity is achieved through complementarity, which ultimately serves to form a unity. Put succinctly, "harmony is the reconciliation of differences into a harmonious unity" (Fung, 1948:174, in Sundararajan, 2020:8). According to Hagström and Nordin (2020), the concept of harmony in political discourses is underpinned by the assumption that diversity can be a potential problem to sociopolitical order and unity, and therefore problematic multiplicity needs to be censored and rectified. However, it not necessarily means that unity must replace diversity but rather build on it. Peng and Nisbett (1999) elucidate the importance of diversity through the principle of complementarity (in Sundararajan, 2013), which emphasizes that "differences can be beneficial since they serve as the needed antipode and complement for each other" (Sundararajan, 2020:5). More specifically, by reading the Confucian philosopher Xun Zi, Sundararajan (2020) argues that this principle is underpinned by "an essential attribute of harmony, namely that it results from the opposite systems — the *yin* and the *yang* — counterbalancing each other" (p.8). That means, "harmony, which is not incompatible with difference; on the contrary, it results when differences are brought together to form a unity" (Fung, 1948:174, in Sundararajan, 2020:6).

Notably, since the inception of the PRC, the traditional mainstream Chinese philosophies of harmony have been reformulated aligning with the sociopolitical changes. During the nation-state building, for example, Mao Zedong (1893-1976) adopted techniques of harmonizing contradictions between the revolutionary classes (the working class and its alliance) and the counter-revolutionary classes, and between democracy deriving from the Marxist-Leninist theories and the centralized power. It was called as "democratic centralism" by Mao, in which harmonization was achieved through "the minority being subordinate to the majority, the lower level to the higher level, the part to the whole, and the entire membership to the Central Committee" (Lin & Lee, 2013:160, in Sundararajan, 2020:21). In 1982, this technique materialized in the *Constitution of the PRC*[9] as "the principle of democratic centralism":

> Article 3 The division of functions and powers between the central and local state institutions shall honour the principle of giving full play to the initiative and motivation of local authorities under the unified leadership of the central authorities.

Note that Mao's democracy, though underpinned by a harmony discourse, was essentially a uniformity-oriented approach to serving the hierarchical sociopolitical order.

Later, in the early 2000s, the concept of *a harmonious society* was constructed by the Communist Party of China (CPC) and the Chinese government, which intended to tackle the growing socioeconomic inequality caused by the tensions between inadequate social infrastructure and explosive market economy (Goron, 2018; Geis & Holt, 2009; Han, 2008). The political rhetoric of this national agenda is to shift China's priority given to economic growth to "a more balanced, Confucian-style approach aimed at maintaining growth while addressing daunting social issues such as the wide gap between rich and poor, widespread environmental degradation, and government and corporate corruption" (Geis & Holt, 2009:75). To this end, all sectors or major constituents should cooperate or be in a state of harmony, even though they represent various interests and the conflicting differences among them could pull the society in different directions (Liang, 2005, in Han, 2008). In comparison with Mao's harmonization tactics which intended to centralize the power at the expense of diversity, this reformulation of harmony in modern China is intentionally restored to its origin in Confucian tradition.

Harmony, in Confucian tradition, is "the successful resolution of all contradictions including that between unity and diversity" within a hierarchical society where social distinctions, such as between emperor and ministers, father and son, the elder and the younger, are prioritized (Sundararajan, 2020:7). That means, the very notion of harmony came into shape along with the ideology of unity in diversity, which was embodied with a hierarchical relationship between them — diversity subordinate to unity. Moreover, a harmonious society can be built only when all social parts play their proper roles and submit to hierarchical sociopolitical order (*Analects*,1938: XII11, in Hagström & Nordin, 2020). The language planning and policy in China is an epitome of this ideology, though it also has the legacy of Mao's democratic centralism. Specifically, the language

management has been shaped by the dominance of the Han language/*hanyu* 汉语 (the Han majority's language, including the standardized Chinese script/*hanzi* 汉字 and speech/*Putonghua* 普通话), which is complemented by diverse minority languages and cultures. This envisions the state's aspiration to create and maintain Great Unity/*datong* (大同) (He, 2013:46) — a state of being a single, organic whole for national integration and ethnic unity (Leibold & Chen, 2013:5; Postiglione, 2008, 2013).

Datong shijie 大同世界 (a world of Great Unity) is a Confucian aspiration. 《礼记》(Li Ji/*Book of Rites*) depicts what such a world looks like:

> When the Great Way is practiced, the world is shared by all; Those with virtue and talents are chosen and used; People value trustworthiness and cultivate harmony with each other. Thus people do not treat only their parents as parents, nor do they treat only their children as children. [...] This is called the Great Unity. ("*Li Yun*, the Great Unity", in Qi & Shen, 2021: n.p., modified by me)

In contemporary China it is reiterated and reformulated as an aspiration of constructing *a global community of shared future*, a Chinese equivalent of world citizenship (Qi & Shen, 2021). That is,

> all countries share a common future, and [it] envisions a world characterized by openness and inclusiveness, equity and justice, harmonious coexistence, diversity and mutual learning, and unity and cooperation. (White Paper, 2023: n.p.)[10].

It is clear that both the traditional aspiration of the Great Unity and the contemporary vision of a global community are fundamentally underpinned by the harmony discourses in Confucian tradition (e.g. see Part III of the White Paper). It is also worth pointing out that this contemporary vision of the Great Unity, which goes beyond national boundaries and the social arena to include the natural world (e.g. environmental agendas), resonates with the Taoist notion of *Supreme Harmony* (太和 *taihe*), that is, the harmony among humans and ultimately between men and nature (Sundararajan, 2020). Yet, the Taoist harmony is fundamentally different from the Confucian one, because of its root in *posthumanist equality* and thus its complete rejection of serving the hierarchical sociopolitical order (Wang, 2022)[11].

Despite being potentially self-contradictory, these harmony discourses are imperative. Especially with China becoming a new major player on the global stage to take up global responsibility and wield influence, it is also under the scrutiny of global rules and norms. For instance, given the linguistic and cultural diversities in China, *hanyu*-dominated language policy and practice, which underscore national unity and development, give rise to concerns and criticisms over the assimilation and loss of ethnic minority languages and cultures (e.g. Grey, 2017, 2019; Lin & Jackson, 2021; Tapp, 2010; Yang, 2009; Zhou, 2000, 2011, 2019). Particularly, when scrutinized through the lens of European plural language perspective, which prioritizes linguistic justice and preservation, the Chinese language policy and management become an issue for debate (He, 2013). However, Pennycook (2002) reminds us that "we can only understand the specific configurations of what languages are used, what they represent, and what values they may carry by understanding the complexity of a specific context" (p.23, also 1998). Especially in the contexts where distinctions between national and minority languages are made, "the social and political circumstances of those who speak a particular language will have a significant impact on the subsequent symbolic and communicative status attached to that language" (May, 2000:374).

In China's case, Turner (2005), based on her decade-long ethnographic study in Yunnan, asserts that

> it is evident that, whatever their [ethnic minorities'] ancestry, learning Mandarin is essential for the young, whilst the importance of English is also recognized. Probably because they cannot afford to be, Asians are less sentimental than we Westerners who want to preserve — and study in minute detail — old traditions and cultures…Survival is what it is all about (p.33).

Decades later, Li, et al. (2022), through their ethnography in poverty-stricken minority regions, also point out that "indigenous [sic, see 2.2.3] speakers just like Hani people who struggle to keep themselves fed and clothed have no time to consider how to maintain their local cultural identity or preserve minority languages" (p.125), though poverty is not limited to the minority groups. Brutt-Griffler (2002) insightfully elucidates that

> [i]f you make ethnicity, nationality, and minority status the unit of analysis, you can conclude that people would want to or have in their interest to maintain their

> mother tongue. If, on the contrary, you take class as the unit of analysis, their interests might dictate emphasis on access to dominant languages (p.225).

That is why, May (2000, 2003) argues that, based on the sociopolitical reality especially since the emergence of nation-states, cultural attributes of an ethnic group such as a particular language

> may be constructed or reconstructed, and may even be discarded by an ethnic group, depending on the particular sociohistorical circumstances of their interactions with other groups, and the need to maintain effectively the boundaries between them (2003:99).

That means, these cultural attributes of ethnicity, more significantly "the *perceived* usefulness" of them (ibid., emphasized initially), are produced by wider historical, social, political, and economic forces.

Aligning with May (2000, 2003), to understand the cultural attributes of ethnic minority groups in China, especially the perceived usefulness/uselessness of them, a review of the sociohistorical trajectories of the construction/reconstruction or discard of these attributes is imperative. Notably, this review is also informed by Foucauldian genealogical method — a way to unpack the historical specificities, sociocultural practices, and external conditions interweaving in the production of knowledges and truths (Lončarević, 2013; Scheurich & McKenzie, 2007; Tamboukou, 1999). Or in Foucault's (1994) own words, a genealogical lens helps not to capture the exact essence of things but to note that "there is 'something altogether different' behind things: not a timeless and essential secret but the secret that they [things] have no essence, or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms" (p.371, in Scheurich & McKenzie, 2007:326). To this end, this historical review, as Foucault (1995) suggested, starts with "a diagnosis of the current situation" (p.31, in Lončarević, 2013:69). In terms of ethnicity in China, one of the most contested issues is about language (e.g. Grey, 2017, 2019, 2021; Lin & Jackson, 2021; Tapp, 2010; Yang, 2009; Zhou, 2000, 2011, 2019). Accordingly, in the following section, I set out the formation and reconstruction of language ideology in Chinese history. The purpose of attending to the historical trajectories of language ideology is to work out the processes and power dynamics by which the perceived usefulness or uselessness of ethnic

minority cultural attributes was shaped, and more importantly to examine their impact on current perceptions of ethnicity.

2.3.1.2 Historical trajectories of *hanyu*-dominated language ideology

Through exploring the formation and development of *hanyu*-dominated language ideology over China's millennia-old history, this section attempts to uncover how and why this ideology continues in contemporary China. The first unification of the Chinese written language (*xiaozhuan* 小篆, a small seal script) can be traced back to the Qin dynasty in 221 BC. Although it was replaced by *lishu* 隶书 (clerical script) in the Han dynasty, during both dynasties, the unified and standardized languages were legitimately and exclusively used by the government and widely in the non-government domain (Gao & Ren, 2019; He,2013). Fei (1988) pointed out that the unification of central China in the Qin dynasty indicated the completion of the Han ethnic community into a national entity and China began its history as a united country (pp.179-180).

Note that, the fusion and exchange among various ethnic groups in the Central Plains (*zhongyuan* 中原) since this period of time has given rise to a common identity of Chinese people, which relies on culture — Hua Xia culture (*huaxia wenming* 华夏文明, the origin of the Han Chinese culture) — instead of biological attributes (Ma, 2010). That is, in traditional China underpinned by Confucianism — "a political-cultural entity" (King, 1997:177, in Ma, 2007:203), the distinction between the civilized Han and less developed minority groups, who shared similar roots, was primarily cultural instead of political. Put differently, the culture-oriented approach supplemented with political integration to unify various ethnic groups was fundamentally an ideological strategy, which made it possible for the ethnic groups, especially the Han in the Central Plains, to attract and assimilate other ethnic groups at the periphery. This ideological approach has become the foundation stone of a Unity of Diversity of Chinese nation (*Zhonghua minzu duoyuan yiti* 中华民族多元一体) — a pluralist unity: a political unity constituted of cultural diversity — with the Han culture being superior (Fei, 1988; Ma, 2007, 2010, 2014). Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that an ideology of *hanyu*-dominated monolingualism came into being at the inception of China as a unified nation.

That said, the Hans in the Central Plains were not always the ruling power over the Chinese long history, and during the non-Han ruled dynasties the role of *hanyu* was weakened. For example, during Yuan dynasty (a Mongol-led imperial dynasty) and Qing dynasty (a Manchu-led imperial dynasty), *hanyu* was not used as the official language. Yet, it still played a critical role in political stability and socioeconomic development (Fei, 1988). *Hanyu* became the official language again in the Ming dynasty, which was also promoted in minority areas. The promotion of *hanyu* was enforced along with the *gaitu guiliu* 改土归流 policy (replacing the native chieftains in frontier regions populated mainly by ethnic minority groups with a unitary system of administrative control building on Confucian culture and *hanyu*) issued by Emperor Yongzheng during the Qing dynasty (Oakes, 1997). Although the Qing dynasty initially adopted a *Manchu*-language-and-*hanyu* bilingual policy, in 1872 *hanyu* became the official language and its spoken form used in Beijing became the national official spoken language (the origin of *Putonghua*) (He, 2013).

The *hanyu*-dominated language trend was also propelled by the Opium Wars (1840-1842, 1856-1860) and the first Sino-Japanese War (1894-1895). Spurred by the defeats in these wars, there was a widely perceived urgency to modernize and unify the country and a national language was identified as a key to such an aspiration (Wan, 2014; Zhang, 2013). For instance, realizing the importance of mass education and a national language to build a modern and unified China, Lu Zhuangzhang, a language teacher and translator, first proposed to simplify and phoneticize the Chinese language (Wan, 2014), which later gave rise to *baihua* 白话 (vernacular-based literary Chinese to replace *wenyan* 文言— classical literary Chinese, Zhang, 2013) and *pinyin* 拼音 (a phonetic alphabet of Chinese). Zhang (2013) argues that these *hanyu*-dominated language reforms were guided by "a Herderian ideology [of] 'one language, one nation' in which linguistic unification was to bring about national unity (e.g. De Francis, 1950)" (p.564).

In the 1930s, *pinyin*, the romanization system for *hanyu* was officially adopted (Adamson & Feng, 2021). Following this, *Putonghua* was established as the standard spoken language of the PRC in 1956. It is a form of Mandarin Chinese with "Beijing speech as its standard pronunciation, the northern Chinese dialect, and modern Chinese literary classics written in vernacular Chinese as its grammatical norm" (National Linguistics Work Committee, 1996:12, in Adamson & Feng, 2021:3). During the

Party-state building, due to the CPC preference of the Soviet experience of building a multinational state over the traditional Chinese imperial language policies which promoted a unified pluralistic polity with the Han civilization as its center (Ma, 2007; 2010), multilingual practices and cultural diversity were encouraged nationwide (He, 2013; Zhou, 2000, 2011, 2019). In essence, the Soviet model and the Chinese imperial model are underpinned by multilingualism and monolingualism respectively. Moreover, Ma (2007) argues that the former is a politization practice regarding ethnic relations while the latter is primarily culture oriented. Echoing this argument, Oakes (1997) observes that the preference to promote cultural diversity, at least on a symbolic level, indicates the Chinese state's attempt "to establish an environment conducive to national economic integration, geopolitical security, and patriotism" (p.48). For example, it led to the establishment of ethnic autonomous regions in China and the implementation of the *Autonomy Law of Minority Nationalities of the PRC* (1984) (Ma, 2007; Postiglione, 2013). In short, Ma (2014) asserts that the Soviet model was fundamentally "the *politization* of ethnic minorities" (p.199).

During 1960s and1970s, various political campaigns, such as Great Leap Forward (1958-1962) as a shortcut to communism and Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) with an underlying logic that "socialist modernization would produce an end to national (that is, ethnic) distinctions" (Oakes, 1997:47), labelled ethnic minority languages, cultures, customs, and rituals as "vestiges of feudal or prefeudal practices" and thus attacked or even prohibited them (Tapp, 2010:101; Turner, 2005; Zhou, 2000, 2011)[2]. Consequently, *hanyu* monolingual education was popularized and teaching *hanyu* at schools in ethnic minority areas became a national obligation (Dai & Cheng, 2007). For instance, since the Cultural Revolution, almost no one can read the new Lahu script (the reformed script based on the older Christian one) in Yunnan, because there has been extremely little teaching of it in schools (Bradley & Bradley, 1999). Furthermore, during the late 1990s and the early 2000s the political unrest in minority regions, primarily because of

[2] For example, during the Cultural Revolution, traditional knowledge and cultural beliefs of ethnic minority groups in southwest China (e.g. Dai people's worship of holy hills) were stigmatized as superstitious and backward and suppressed by the state. As a result, the breakdown of their traditional practices and cultural beliefs led to not only cultural identity issues but also a loss of knowledge of natural resource use and management (Xu et al, 2005). Xu and Ribot (2004) point out that the political chaos fuelled deforestation in many mountainous and ecologically sensitive areas at that time (in Xu et al., 2005:8).

social, political, and economic disparities (e.g. Sun, 2020; Wu & Ingram, 2019), gave birth to a fear of ethnic separatism (e.g. Elliot, 2015; He, 2013; Ma, 2007, 2010). These further reinforced the continuous need to build a modern and unified nation state and consolidate national identity construction (Zhang, 2013; Zhou, 2011). As a result, an assimilationist approach to language management was adopted (He, 2013; Zhang, 2013; Zhou, 2011, 2019).

The embarkment of economic reforms in the late 1970s and resultant large population movement nationwide in the late 1990s gave rise to a high demand for a national lingua franca to serve communication, and accordingly the assimilationist approach materialized in laws. For instance, *Law of the PRC on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language* (2000)[12], known as the National Common Language Law which is the only language law in China (Zhang et al., 2023), stipulates that the standardized Chinese language — *Putonghua* — is intended to "(Article 1) play a better role in public activities, and to promote economic and cultural exchanges among all of China's ethnic groups and regions". To these ends, "(Article 4) all citizens *have the right* to learn and use the standard spoken and written Chinese language" while "(Article 8) all ethnic groups *have the freedom* to use and develop their own spoken and written languages [...but] in accordance with the Constitution, the Law on Regional National Autonomy, and the relevant provisions of other laws"[13] (emphasized by me). That means, *Putonghua* is popularized as a legal right and empowered by socioeconomic development agenda while minority languages are relegated to a restrained freedom. Unsurprisingly, this top-down language management has resulted in the side effects that some minority languages are on the verge of disappearance (e.g. Grey, 2017, 2019, 2021; Wang & Hatoss, 2023; Zhou, 2011, 2019).

To address these issues generated by the commitment to national unity and common prosperity (共同富裕 *gongtong fuyu*)[14] — a socialist goal resting on an equal and harmonious society, rather than challenge the national language policy per se, various efforts are made to preserve different languages as national strategic resources. For instance, *the Eleventh Five-Year Development Plan of National Language Works* (2007)[15] foregrounds that the language works should "adhere to the harmonious unity of the dominance and diversity of language life" (translated by me). Specifically, *language life* refers to various social activities related to languages, including language education, language research, and its application in social life (Li, 2013a: v). It is a part of the

political agenda for constructing a harmonious society put forward in 2006 and accordingly manifests itself in language planning as a goal to build "a harmonious language life" (Li, 2013b). In this sense, the basic principle of this directive is to alleviate the increasing tensions between the dominant role of *Putonghua* and the diverse minority languages as legitimized freedom granted by the Constitution of the PRC.

To that end, *the Thirteenth Five-Year Development Plan of National Language Works (2016)*[16] specifies that it is necessary to "further strengthen the important and fundamental role of the national common language and script in safeguarding national unity, promoting ethnic harmony and social development", on the one hand; and "to protect languages of all ethnic groups [...] as important carriers of Chinese culture and tradition in a scientific way and to consolidate their unique role in transmitting Chinese culture", on the other (translated by me). *The Outline of China's Medium- and Long-term Language Reform and Development (2012–2020)*[17] clarifies protecting minority languages in a scientific way as "respecting the freedom of all ethnic groups to use and develop their own languages, viewing all languages as valuable cultural resources, taking targeted measures to protect minority languages, and giving full play to their role in passing on and transmitting Chinese culture" (Zhang et al., 2023:17). In brief, these efforts, scaffolded by a harmony discourse, are "a dual-track management of conflicting interests" (Sundararajan, 2020:9). That is, minority languages are reframed mainly as symbolic resources of linguistic and cultural diversity embodied in the unity of the Chinese nation with a common language and culture.

Notably, what these policies reframe actually resonates Ma's (2007) *ideal* nation-ethnicity framework of the Chinese nation — political unity and cultural pluralism (see 2.2.3). In this framework there are two dimensions of cultural identities embedded in cultural pluralism: a national and unified cultural identity at the national/macro level (in the policy initiatives above phrased as "Chinese culture"); the traditional and diverse cultures of ethnic groups at the meso-level (in the initiatives above phrased as "carriers of Chinese culture and tradition"). In this sense, both this nation-ethnicity framework and the language management policies emphasize the dominant role of a national language (i.e. *Putonghua*) and culture, supplemented by minority languages and cultures.

In effect, the policy initiatives discussed above have shaped *the Project for Protecting the Language Resources of China (2015-2021)*, or *Yubao* Project (语保工程 *yubao gongcheng*)[18]. It has materialized as a series of nationwide efforts to "preserve and document regional Chinese varieties and ethnic minority languages" through "scientific management" and "to preserve cultural diversity and cultural heritage in the database of archived language varieties" (Shen & Gao, 2019:6-10). That means, as reiterated by other directives, minority languages are primarily treated as regional and traditional resources of Chinese culture to be archived instead of being promoted for use.

Notably, regional governments have also made efforts to combine this project with local education and cultural tourism for "real material benefits" (Shen & Gao, 2019:10). This can be explained by the emergent *mayor economy* — political centralization paired with economic decentralization — in contemporary China. That is, "the central government takes care of the domestic and international politics and sets overall economic policy, while local governments tend to the economy itself" (Jin, 2023:133). In this new political economy system, for the mayors/local officials, the access to higher rungs of the political ladder lies in the local economic performance. To this end, the officials try to build a thriving local economy by supporting both state-owned enterprises and promising private sector. As a result, the intertwined operation of local governments and business sectors (e.g. cultural and tourism industries), which is sponsored by the state, provides ethnic minority languages and cultures with a place in the capital markets such as ethnic and heritage tourism and thus grants them certain economic values. However, meanwhile it also gives birth to new tensions between the material value and the communicative function of these resources, along with their affection potential for ethnic identity maintenance.

These tensions, at the nascent stage of Chinese political economy, are ameliorated mainly through foregrounding economic achievement at the expense of such as linguistic diversity, especially in poverty-stricken areas. The *Targeted Poverty Alleviation* (精准脱贫 *jingzhun fupin*) cemented in 2015 in China is a case in point. Once as a developing country with the largest rural poor population in the world, which mainly

populated in the remote mountainous areas, border arears, and minority areas[3], China has a decade-long battle against poverty (Liu, et al., 2017; Davie, et al., 2021). To achieve the goal set by the CPC Central Committee that all poor Chinese citizens should be lifted out of extreme poverty by 2020, a pairing mechanism between each impoverished household and a local official was adopted. That is, the responsibility for the eradication of a household's poverty was assigned to a specific local official (Davie, et al., 2021). Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that material growth instead of the preservation of minority languages and cultures has been prioritized. The booming of cultural and ethnic tourism in the impoverished areas that cashes in on minority cultures and languages showcases this priority (e.g. Chio, 2017; Grey, 2021).

Apart from the pairing mechanism, *Putonghua* promotion was also listed as a task in poverty alleviation in 2018. According to the Ministry of Education, language barriers, such as only 60% of people speaking *Putonghua* in impoverished areas, impede poverty eradication (*Xinhua*, 2020)[19]. It is underpinned by the logic that the use of *Putonghua* is important [and also almost exclusive, see Endnote 13] for education, and education is the key to poverty reduction (*Xinhua*, 2019)[20]. In other words, minority languages are assumed to have little access to higher socioeconomic status.

In sum, these nationwide social programs, such as *Yubao* project and Targeted Poverty Alleviation, give priority to economic development insofar as it is achieved by undermining the diversity of minority languages and marketizing minority cultures, though in the discourse of building a harmonious society with a quest for common prosperity. Having said that, with China becoming a major role on the global stage and thus under the global scrutiny and also with the Chinese political economy fast evolving and maturing, what waits to be seen is how the CPC and the Chinese government will address the tensions between economic growth and the preservation of multiple

[3] Yunnan Province is a combination of all these areas and not surprisingly one of the most poverty-stricken provinces in China. For example, in 2007 the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development reported that 65% of the poor (1.47 million) in Yunnan populated in ethnic minority areas involving 56 counties. These counties were among the most impoverished counties both in Yunnan and in China. In addition, the basic education in ethnic minority communities was almost ten years behind that in the non-ethnic minority communities. The average years of schooling in these areas was less than 6 years (Tsung et al., 2011; see also 1.2.2.2 for my reflection on home visits due to a high drop-out rate in the multi-ethnic county).

languages and cultures for ethnic unity and between social development and social harmony in a satisfactory way. A case in point is the Chinese government's joint efforts with UNESCO to issue *Protection and Promotion of Linguistic Diversity of the World: Yuelu Proclamation* on the 1st World Language Resources Protection Conference held in Changsha, China, in September 2018[21]. As Jin (2023) concludes in *The New China Playbook: Beyond Socialism and Capitalism*, China, with its setbacks in recent history serving as a constant reminder, "is constantly changing, adapting its state governance and institutions, and crafting new strategies and policies as the mindset of its people evolves to meet emerging circumstances" (p.316). More importantly, through analysing the new role that China has taken now, Jin asserts that over the next few decades, the most significant consideration that will shape the course of China is to address the social issues around inequality and fairness (ibid., pp.316-320). Put another way, China is going to deal with the biggest dilemma confronting it: "How can social harmony accompany growing wealth?" (ibid., p.319).

This historical review unpacks that China's language ideology and policy are shaped not only by the top-down political power but more precisely by the joint force of sociohistorical, political-economic, geopolitical, and cultural factors. Aware of the complexities, although He (2013), among others, also calls for efforts to preserve language plurality in China, he points out that "language is but one element of cultural diversity". In other words, culture is not reducible to language but exists in and across all semiotic resources, both material and non-material, with which people make and share meaning (Hawkins, 2018; Kress, 2012).

To illustrate, in Chapter 3, the ethnographic research of the language practice and choice of ethnic minority groups (e.g. Grey, 2017, 2021; Wang & Hatoss, 2021, 2023) are examples of ethnicity that is not always based on language. May (2003) pointedly contends that "[w]hile a specific language may well be identified as a significant cultural marker of a particular ethnic group, there is no inevitable correspondence between language and ethnicity" (p.105). Echoing this argument, Buccellati (2010) asserts that, compared with language, other cultural markers based on ethnic style and customs are more visible and understandable to outsiders, which thus endows these markers with immediacy and transparency of their quality as signs representing a specific ethnic group. In line with this argument, Chapter 3 reviews the literature exploring various ethnic markers.

2.3.2 Summary

This section sets out the sociohistorical formation and reconstruction of ethnicity in China, which is intertwined with sociopolitical and socioeconomic changes and underpinned by certain ideologies (e.g. *hanyu*-dominated language ideologies). This review, resonating with my reflections on my life journey (1.2), unpacks two dimensions of ethnic (re)construction in the Chinese context, namely multi-semiotic nature of ethnic representations and the interplay between social forces and agency embedded in the (re)construction process. To gain a better understanding of the two dimensions, especially in contemporary China, Chapter 3 explores the diverse semiotic resources mobilized to (re)construct ethnicity, which is embedded in the socioeconomic and geopolitical changes in China.

2.4 Conclusion

At the beginning of the 21st century, Postiglione (2008, 2013) argued that in China ethnic minority culture was celebrated, but meanwhile ethnic diversity was largely constrained by social powers. Accordingly, he raised the question whether China would promote *plural monoculturalism* or *harmonious multiculturalism* to manage its ethnic diversity. In the former structure, "China's rich ethnic and cultural communities are reduced to fifty-six distinct and rigid *minzu* boxes, with each category possessing its own cultural straitjacket: ethnonym, history, beliefs, festivals, customs, and costumes" (Leibold & Chen, 2013:14). While harmonious multiculturalism promotes interethnic cultural vitality and integration and equitable access to socioeconomic opportunities for all ethnic groups (Postiglione, 2013). As such, it is conductive to making ethnic minority communities more effectively integrated into the larger regional, national, and global scene (Postiglione, 2008:14). In short, Postiglione's question presumes essentially an either-or situation.

Over a decade later, no definite answer is available to Postiglione's question. However, what becomes clearer is that, with the mediation between the top-down management and bottom-up agency and with the marriage of politics and economy nationwide and

globally (e.g. Jin, 2023; Oakes, 2000), plural monoculturalism and harmonious multiculturalism have been woven together. The interweaving is intended to continue the ideology of *a pluralist unity* — a political unity constituted of cultural diversity with the Han Chinese culture as its center (Fei, 1988; Ma, 2007, 2010, 2014) — in contemporary China. The continuance depends on creating socioeconomic and sociopolitical opportunities for ethnic minority groups to maintain cultural diversity in a unified nation dominated by the Han Chinese language and culture. That means, the harmonious interweaving of cultural plurality and political unity is embodied in a *both-and* logic instead of *either-or*. The former is an inclusive approach to diversity and a structural requirement of harmony, which is achieved when differences are brought together to form a unity, though embodied with a hierarchical system; while the latter is exclusive and intends to reduce diversity (Sundararajan, 2013, 2020). Put simply, in contemporary China, cultural diversity is retained and capitalized on to construct a harmonious and unified nation.

Informed by this review and the socially-(re)constructed ethnicity in contemporary China, this research, within the social constructionist paradigm, goes beyond language ideologies and practices to include perceptions and actual use of available semiotic resources and signs (e.g. food, artefacts, natural materials) for meaning- and sensemaking in ethnic minority areas. Moreover, it traces and examines the impact of social structure and ideologies on individuals' semiotic choices and perceptions. To these ends, it is imperative to understand the dynamics between social structure and agency playing out in the (re)construction of ethnicity; and to explore what and how ethnic cultures and traditions are entrained or abandoned by the social changes in contemporary China, and for what purposes. Chapter 3 illustrates studies in ethnic cultures beyond languages and the social fabrics woven into them.

Chapter 3 A review of literature on ethnicity

3.1 Introduction

The sociohistorical review in Chapter 2 shows that ethnic markers are multi-semiotic, whose values, especially socioeconomic ones, are largely decided by the political-economic market in China. To unpack the entanglement, this chapter reviews studies regarding language ideologies and language choices, linguistic/semiotic landscapes shaped by the ethno-tourism in China, ethnic practices underpinned by a *yuangshengtai* discourse, as well as ethnic foods and cuisine mobilized by tourism and the *yuangshengtai* discourse. Based on the review, I propose to anchor the current research to the tenet of social semiotics (4.2) and to interpret the intricate structure-agency dynamics embedded in the (re)construction of ethnic identifiers from an ethnographic lens (4.3).

3.2 Language ideologies and individuals' agency regarding ethnicity in contemporary China

Ideology, from a sociosemiotic perspective, is a system of ideas, which are organized from a particular perspective shared by members of a social group and thus reflect their fundamental and relatively stable beliefs, goals, interests, and values (Kress & Hodge,1979, in Hodge, 2012; van Dijk, 1993, 2006). Echoing them, Barthes (1967) contends that, in semiotics, the social aspect of ideology indicates its close communication with culture, history, and knowledge, which manifests in the system of representation and interpretation between members of a culture (in Hall, 1997). Viewed in this light, *language/linguistic ideology* refers to "socially, politically, and morally loaded cultural assumptions about the way that language works in social life and about the role of particular linguistic forms in a given society" (Woolard, 2016:7). As for the language ideologies of a specific ethnic group, they often indicate "historically, politically, and culturally constructed ethnic boundaries and identities, which points to a constructionist understanding of ethnicity" (Yang, 2018:927). In this sense, language ideologies and *language attitudes* — "an affective, cognitive or behavioural index of

evaluative reactions toward different language varieties or their speakers" (Ryan et al., 1982:7, in Wang & Hatoss, 2023:164) — are interrelated in that they both deal with language-related beliefs. Yet, they have different scopes, that is, language ideology within the scope of a large sociohistorical scale while language attitude of a more subjective and personal level (ibid.). Or as van Dijk (2001) elaborates, attitudes are limited to specific social domains and may be underpinned by certain ideologies. More succinctly, ideologies impact social attitudes.

Given that a social constructionist understanding of ethnicity (re)construction takes account of both microlevel agency and meso-/macro-level social forces (see 2.2), this review accordingly attends to both language ideology and individuals' language attitudes and perceptions. In terms of language ideology, for example, Grey and Baioud (2021) challenge the longstanding assumptions of East-West and Chinese-English binary ideologies. Their argument drew upon the findings from Grey's (2017, 2019) ethnography of language policy conducted in Guangxi Province — a Zhuang (the largest minority group) autonomous region in China, and Baioud's (2018) ethnographic study of Mongolian wedding performers' multilingual and multicultural practices in the Inner Mongolia of China. They argue that with the shifting linguistic and cultural orders in contemporary China, especially in minority contexts, *Putonghua* coupled with English is reconstructed as signs of modernization and urbanization, while minority languages and cultures as traditional and subordinated signs. In other words, a new binary language ideology emerges in the PRC, namely, the dichotomization of *Putonghua* together with English practices and minority language practices.

To illustrate, Baioud (2018) ethnographically studied Mongolian wedding rituals and found that the trilingual (involving *Putonghua*, English, and Mongolian) and tri-cultural (including Han Chinese, Mongolian, and western cultures) weddings reinforce and reproduce the ideologies that Mongolian language and culture were traditional and authentic, while *Putonghua* and Han Chinese culture along with English and western cultures were modern and socially mobile. Baioud argues that the Mongols' deliberate trilingual and tri-cultural performance at the weddings illuminates their agency to authenticate their own cultures on the one hand and reach out to the modernity symbolized by *Putonghua* and English on the other.

Regarding ethnic authenticity, Yang (2018) ethnographically examined the language ideologies among Tibetan students and their roles in shaping ethnic boundaries at a *minzu* university[4] between 2011 and 2012. She has identified an *authentic ideology* — a collective identity of ethnic authenticity constructed by both the Tibetan students themselves and outsiders — which is intertwined with the ethnic language ideology. This research unpacks how "Tibetan language has been a definitive factor in Tibetan students' constant authenticating acts to delineate 'Tibetan-ness'" (p.973). Although the persistent construction of ethnic authenticity by the Tibetan students to resist the marginalisation of the Tibetan group and thus to achieve a higher ethnic status, it inevitably stigmatises and marginalises certain Tibetan population. That is, it gives rise to a new hierarchy among the Tibetan students themselves — "authentic" Tibetan (who speak Tibetan language) at the top, half Tibetan half Han (whose Tibetan language is mixed with Chinese words or grammar) in the middle, and "fake" Tibetan (who do not speak Tibetan language) at the bottom. In another scenario, Baioud (2018) argues that the Mongolian participants' authenticating practices are driven by the belief that Mongolian language as a linguistic commodity indicates exoticization and folklorization, particularly for outsiders. That means, in this case, Mongolian language is used by the group members themselves, incentivized by the market, to delineate ethnic boundaries which dichotomizes insiders and outsiders.

Focusing on the microlevel, Shan (2021) investigated students' (223 minority students and 161 Han students) language background, language practices, educational and socioeconomic profile, and language attitude through a questionnaire survey in a *minzu* university in Guizhou. She has found that bilingualism/multilingualism among the students is prevalent and that *Putonghua*-English bilingualism is dominant. In addition, although the ethnic minority students believe their minority languages should be retained, they think *Putonghua* proficiency is a vital part of their self-definition and generally prioritize *Putonghua* and English. Grey (2017) has also identified similar language attitudes among the university students in her study, even though they themselves choose to learn Zhuang language at the *minzu* universities in Guangxi.

[4] *Minzu* universities 民族大学 are institutions in China that "mainly target ethnic minority students through preferential admission policies. In addition to providing courses that are commonly found in other universities, *minzu* universities are also specialized in ethnic studies" (Zhang, 2019:286).

According to the students, “Zhuang is not an educated person’s language and not useful for socio-economic mobility” (ibid., p.12).

A little different from Grey and Baioud’s (2021) argument that *Putonghua* together with English is the access to modernity and urbanity, Xu (2019), through observing and interviewing 24 ethnic minority people in various minority regions, asserts that “*Putonghua* serves as the ‘admission ticket’ to a market of possibilities and opportunities” (p.35). The participants’ *Putonghua* competence determines the values of other languages (minority languages and English) regardless of the sociolinguistic context. Unlike Lin and Jackson (2021) and Zhou (2011, 2019), among others, who blame the assimilation of minority languages on the Chinese government and policy, Xu (2019) argues that, despite the power-distributing role of the language policy, there are still many other variables co-constructing the values of various languages, such as sociohistorical and socioeconomic factors and individuals’ agency.

As regards agency, Grey (2017, 2019), via her ethnographic study in Guangxi, identified some *agentive stylization*. That is, “individuals self-consciously make new usage of the enregistered semiotic resources” including or excluding Zhuang language (Grey & Baioud, 2021:49). Moreover, she notes that there are a growing existence and acceptance of people who identify as Zhuang but cannot or choose not to speak Zhuang. These people

> agentively de-register spoken Zhuang language from [...] the Zhuang cultural register but continue to employ other signs from that register, such as participation in Zhuang cultural activities, listening to Zhuang music, and coming from families and neighborhoods where other people spoke/speak Zhuang (ibid., p.50).

Similarly, Wang and Hatoss (2021, 2023) ethnographically examined the changes that the growing tea business brought to a Blang community (an ethnic minority group) in a mountain township in Yunnan. They have found that the participants (local Blang people of different generations) embrace the shift from Blang monolingualism to Blang-Chinese bilingualism, even the likely shift to Chinese (e.g. *Putonghua*, Chinese dialects) monolingualism. This shift is underpinned by their ideological belief that “Chinese is a language of advancement and speaking Chinese indexes the development” (ibid., 2021:13). The primary contributor to this belief is that the tea industry has enhanced the

local people's contact with *Putonghua* speakers outside the community and made it the dominant language in the local linguistic landscape. While English is also gaining currency because of the opportunities available in the global market, Blang language holds little value in the commercial landscape. Shaped by the pervasive perception that Blang language has limited values in producing material benefits, Blang people are motivated to speak *Putonghua* and encourage the younger generation to learn English.

Notably, unlike Grey and Baioud (2021) who interpret ethnic minorities' language choice as an agentive practice, Wang and Hatoss (2021) argue that Blang people's attitude to and acceptance of the language shift shows "a lack of agency in taking control of the future of their language and in teaching their children Blang" (p.13). In this sense, the local ethnic minorities are seen as passive recipients of social forces and changes. To argue against the assumed dichotomy between agency and social structure, Hays (1994) clarifies that *choices* (e.g. language choices) — conscious or unconscious, individual and collective — are always *socially shaped* (pp.64-65, originally emphasized). Social actors' choices are simultaneously enabled and constrained by social structures and thus patterned and comprehensible within the fundamentally structured social realm. Moreover, despite the above-mentioned researchers' different interpretations, it is clear that the presence or absence of agency is increasingly driven by socioeconomic considerations, which is underpinned by *a developmentalist oriented language ideology* (Grey, 2017). That is, the evaluation of language foregrounds the instrumentality of languages in seeking economic profits and social mobility.

In sum, this review reveals that in contemporary China, the developmentalist language ideology manifests as a new binary language ideology. It positions *Putonghua* and Han-Chinese culture together with English as modernity and social mobility in opposition to ethnic minority languages and other cultural resources, which are reconstructed as being authentic, traditional, and commercially valuable. Furthermore, the formation of this ideology involves not only social forces but also individuals' agency. Put another way, the emerged development-oriented language ideology and resultant language beliefs and practices require a broader approach to interpreting ethnicity. For one thing, it is necessary to make sense of the interplay between social powers and actors; and for another, the mediating efforts made by microlevel actors through using or discarding certain ethnic cultural resources — individuals' *semiotic choices* — should be attended. Section 3.3 reviews literature investigating these entangled factors.

3.3 Diverse ethnic representations mirroring socioeconomic and geopolitical change in China

3.3.1 Linguistic/semiotic landscape and ethno-tourism

Linguistic landscape, put simply, refers to the visibility and representation of languages in public spaces and places. It is the dynamic use of languages in real life as a marker of the power relations and status of linguistic communities who are inhabitants of the territory (Landry & Bourhis, 1997; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009). In other words, it is constitutive of place-making and constructing social orders (Grey, 2021) through "contextualiz[ing] the public space within issues of identity and language policy of nations, political and social conflicts" (Shohamy & Gorter, 2009:4). In this sense, the examination of linguistic landscape helps to understand the deeper meanings and hidden messages conveyed in words and images displayed and exposed in public spaces (Gorter, 2006, 2013; Pennycook, 2009; Shohamy & Gorter, 2009).

More recently, the scope of linguistic landscape research has been expanded, including not only fixed and moving public signage but also everything in a public space and the space itself as a semiotic resource (e.g. Grey, 2017, 2021; Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010a; Pennycook, 2009, 2019, 2022a). According to Kress and Van Leeuwen (1996), the new realities of *the semiotic landscape* come into being primarily because "[g]lobal flows of capital dissolve not only cultural and political boundaries but also semiotic boundaries" (p.34, in Iedema, 2003:38). Echoing them, Jaworski and Thurlow (2010a) argue that in a new political-economic world, all landscapes are semiotic, that is, "[their] meaning is always construed in the act of socio-cultural interpretation" (p.2). In this sense, "any (public) space with visible inscription made through deliberate human intervention and meaning making" is semiotic landscape (ibid.).

With this field proliferating worldwide, it also has gained currency in China but with limited research examining the linguistic/semiotic landscapes in ethnic minority regions, among both Chinese and English literature (Nie et al. 2023; Wang & Gao, 2023). Of these limited studies, the focuses are mainly on how the interplay amongst language policy, the trend of urbanization, modernization and globalization, as well as

commodification of minority languages and cultures in tourism shapes the linguistic/semiotic landscapes in different regions (e.g. Grey, 2017, 2019, 2021; Li et al. 2022; Nie et al, 2023; Yao et al., 2023).

The merger between tourism and sociolinguistics relies on the space provided by tourism to test out the central tropes of sociolinguistics, including *community*, *identity*, *authenticity*, and *languages in society* (Jaworski & Thurlow, 2010b). Bucholtz (2003) argues that *authenticity* as the pivotal concept undergirds approximately every part of sociolinguistics, including identifying linguistic phenomena, defining social groups for study, and collecting and analysing data. That said, Bucholtz is also aware that the idea of authenticity is problematic due to its endorsement of a "real" or "genuine" community/group member who speaks "real" language in authentic contexts. This endorsement relies on the assumption that an authentic member possesses, biologically or culturally or both, inherent characteristics which legitimize his/her membership. As such, identity is primordial and prescribed. To avoid a prescriptive view of authentic membership and identity, Bucholtz proposes to replace authenticity with *authentication* and clarifies that authenticity are effects realized through social actors' authenticating practices such as linguistic and other symbolic practices. In this sense, *identity* is formed by continuously negotiated social practices and cautiously tailored in its contexts, in which relations among social actors within and beyond a community and larger structures of power are intertwined.

These concepts, when contextualized in tourism, manifest as social phenomena such as cultural representation or traditional practices packed as products for tourist consumption, linguistic/semiotic landscaping in tourist areas, and the circulation and commodification of semiotic resources (e.g. language, artefact, food, clothing). Look closely and one can notice that all these phenomena share a common attribute — authenticity, as is the case for sociolinguistics. Unsurprisingly, adopting authenticity as a selling point has become a prevalent strategy in tourism marketing, such as among ethno-tourist destinations and cultural heritage sites (e.g. Kendall, 2017; Oakes, 1993, 1997; Yang & Wall, 2009a, 2009b). As a result, ethno-tourist products such as festivals, rituals, costumes, artifacts, cuisine, performances, and architecture are oftentimes perceived as authentic/inauthentic depending on whether they are enacted or created by local people in accordance with traditions (MacCannell, 1976/1989, in Yang & Wall, 2009a:236). That said, echoing Wang (1999), Yang and Wall (2009a) contend that

authenticity in tourism is not a universal notion but a dynamic and fluid process involving negotiation and creation, the evaluations of which change with contexts and individuals' perspectives. In this sense, it resonates with Bucholtz's (2003) authentication.

Regarding the intersection of sociolinguistics and tourism, Heller et al. (2014a) further argue that it is important to understand tourism as *a discursive space* with its center on linguistic and other semiotic resources which are produced, valued and exchanged unequally but also creatively, and which therefore position social actors differently regarding their repertoires. As for the discursive, Hall (1992), by reading Foucault, argues that "since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do — our conduct — all practices have a discursive aspect" (p.291, in Hall, 1997:44, initially emphasized). In this sense, tourism is attached with certain meaning, such as being ethnic, by social practices like authenticating, place-making, commodifying, and identity-forming.

Owing to its discursive nature, tourism becomes an influential cultural phenomenon. It is a dominant player in the ongoing cultural construction of tourist destinations and meanwhile in the networks of political economy (e.g. Oakes, 1993). That means, tourism provides a window into the complicated entanglements of linguistic/semiotic landscapes, social forces, and agency. A case in point is Grey's (2017, 2021) ethnographic studies examining the material and linguistic features of new high-speed rail infrastructure across Guangxi where tourism has become a pillar industry. Grey (2021) argues that the high-speed rail network and its representation coupled with the mobilized linguistic and semiotic resources have reformed and normalized urban linguistic and material practices to serve tourism. More specifically, her findings of the absence of minority languages but not other cultural elements (e.g. the minority groups' dancing performance, clothing, and rural habitats) and the dominant presence of *Putonghua* paired with English (e.g. textual, auditory) in the tourist settings, reveal that these practices lower language barriers for tourists and meanwhile fit with a multicultural imaginary for tourism.

These practices, as Grey argues, are underpinned by the beliefs that minority languages have dissociated from modern and urban life. Put another way, ethnic tourism is "a product of market economy under modernity background" with unique ethnic minority

culture as its main commodity (Chen, 2014:758). Against this backdrop, the linguistic diversity involving minority languages is negatively evaluated as a barrier to the mobility of tourists and therefore tourism capital. Facing this, Grey (2021) raises concerns that when the minority languages are publicly displayed as unmarketable commodity, their symbolic power is eroded and hence their affordances as an identity resource is reduced.

Yet, seeing ethno-tourism from a different light, Xie (2011) argues that

> [c]ommodification is neither possible to avoid and is a positive process to publicize ethnic cultures. The process of cultural evolution associated with tourism does not necessarily break down a place-based sense of identity nor render it inauthentic. Instead, it may become an important factor in the ongoing construction of ethnic identity. (p.143, in Crang, 2015:201)

In other words, as Bucholtz (2003) observes, identity is constantly negotiated and (re)constructed, and more importantly it is consciously adapted to its contexts.

In the case of ethno-tourism, the contexts seem to be a sociolinguistic/sociosemiotic reality in which, under political-economic influences, ethnic minority languages are repositioned in or even erased from the ethnic tourism landscape. This linguistic landscaping practice plays an important role in the ethno-tourist attractions to stage "ethnic Others" for tourist gaze (Grey, 2021). *Tourist gazes* are constructed through the contrasts implied with non-tourist forms of social experience and practices (Urry, 2002). That means, the gaze is attracted by difference or otherness, and notices contrast and distinctiveness (Long, 2004). Notably, ethnic otherness can be staged by ethnic minorities themselves (e.g. Bai, 2007; Oakes, 1993). In any case, the emergent linguistic/semiotic landscape in ethnic minority areas in China is in service of both political agendas and the economic market.

For instance, by analysing signage photos collected from different functional areas in Shangri-La City, Yunnan and interviewing local officials and residents, Nie et al. (2023) found that both top-down language management policy and language commodification in tourism play a vital role in promoting minority languages (mainly Tibetan). However, the interviews with ethnic minority residents unveiled a negative view concerning the pervasive commodification of Tibetan language in tourist areas. For the Tibetan people, Tibetan is the language of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, given that Shangri-La is a multi-

ethnic city, the booming tourism and the regional signage-related policy to promote Tibetan have re-consolidated the existing language hierarchy. Specifically, Chinese script is further prioritized on signs, English emerges as a strong linguistic player in the commercial domain, Tibetan language is revitalized through language commodification and the regional sign policy, while other minority languages (e.g. Lisu language, Naxi language) are almost completely wiped out from the linguistic landscapes. Pennycook (1998), through a Foucauldian understanding of power as "diffused throughout social life", insightful observes that "even the claim to language rights by a minority language will almost inevitably be a claim over other varieties" (p.80).

Similarly, Yao et al. (2023), who analysed 1497 language signs and the implementation of regional signage policies in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, also argue that the intensity of policy support largely facilitates the visibility of Yi language on public signage. That said, Chinese speech (e.g. *Putonghua*) and script have become the lingua franca in this region, while Yi language has various degrees of visibility in different areas. Specifically, it has a higher presence in the rural areas populated by the Yi people due to a demographic demand, while in the fast-developing areas like tourist attractions and schools, it has a much lower presence. Echoing Grey (2017, 2019, 2021), they conclude that this trend can be explained by the widely held belief that Chinese and English are valuable languages, representing better education and employment opportunities, while Yi language is only seen as a heritage and local lingua franca.

In sum, the studies above show that, with fast social changes facilitated by the top-down efforts to harmonize and develop the country as well as by the bottom-up desires for social mobility and higher socioeconomic status, a far more complicated landscape involving ethnicity has emerged. Viewed from the macrolevel, a language divide — not necessarily conflicting — between *Putonghua* along with English and minority languages has been reinforced. The former represents modernization and urbanization, while the latter paired with other cultural and material resources is increasingly deployed as valuable symbolic resources and used to authenticate ethnic minority tourism destinations. Nevertheless, at the meso-/micro level, the linguistic landscape is only part of the landscaping practices regarding ethnic minorities. With the booming ethno-tourism in contemporary China, coupled with the rise of an innovative form of ecotourism labelled with the *yuangshengtai* rhetoric to marry ethnicity with ecosystem

(see 3.3.2), not only linguistic resources but also other cultural and even natural resources are added to the tourism landscape to represent ethnic minorities (e.g. Grey, 2021; Wu, 2014). That said, the discussed studies (e.g. Li et al., 2022; Nie et al., 2023; Yao et al., 2023; see also Lu et al., 2020; Nie & Yao, 2024) still limit the linguistic/language part of linguistic/language landscape to various named languages per se.

Actually, since the rise of ethnic tourism in the 1980s, MacCannell (1984) has observed that "[t]ourism has the capacity to make dizzying leaps over existing political, cultural, and social class boundaries, enmeshing a great diversity of local groups, communities, artifacts, and natural attractions in its expansion" (p.387). This process not only impacts local communities but also constantly produces social spaces to perform and reinvent authenticity — *staged authenticity* — for tourist attention (MacCannell, 1973, 1984). That said, this observation also carries the undertone that tourism as an integral part of modernization is "breaking down the space of authentic places, leaving in its wake a homogenized landscape in which place-based identities [are] artificially and inauthentically constructed" (Oakes, 1993:51). In other words, ethnic groups and members, along with their culture and identity, fall victim to political-economic forces.

Regarding the latter argument, I, echoing Bucholtz (2003) and Oakes (1993), take a different stance. I argue that the above studies — prevalently seeing individual agency as being weighed down by the structures of power (except Grey & Baioud, 2021; Nie et al., 2023) — have only partially attended to the dynamic and multiscale interactive nature of cultural reconstruction and identity (re)formation mobilised by ethno-tourism in China. It may explain why a shared concern emerges from these studies, that is, ethnic cultural diversity and identities being threatened by the state-sponsored and local government regulated modernization and urbanization. By contrast, Oakes (1993), based on his study of political economy and ethnic tourism development in China with Guizhou as the field site, argues that the power structure in China like many other nation-states has not erased local history and identity or allows no room for human agency in the process of commercial production. Furthermore, he calls for the recognition that "marginalized ethnic groups, the 'objects of the tourist's gaze', [are] active participants in mediating the tension between state-promoted commercial logic and cultural integrity" (p.51).

Resonating with Oakes (1993), among others, and aware of the socially-(re)constructed and multi-semiotic nature of ethnic representation found from my life experience (1.2) and the sociohistorical review of ethnicity (re)construction (2.3.1), this research is thus anchored to the notion of *semiotic* (see 4.2.1) in order to capture the diverse cultural (including languages) and natural resources as ethnic representations in Yunnan, China; and meanwhile it also attends to the situated and dynamic interplay between individuals' agency and social forces from a sociosemiotic lens (4.2.2). For a better understanding of both aspects, sections 3.3.2 and 3.3.3 pay special attention to the increasing role of multi-semiotic resources, especially natural resources, in the (re)construction of ethnicity, which is materialized as ethno-and-ecotourism in southwest China.

3.3.2 *Yuanshengtai* ethnic culture with an ecotourism label

The notion of *yuanshengtai* 原生态 (literally primordial/original ecology, e.g. Luo, 2018a, 2018b; Rees, 2016; Wu, 2014) was coined at the beginning of twenty-first century. It was first used by film makers and performance artists to valorize "the symbiosis of untarnished landscapes and culturally distinct [ethnic minority] inhabitants" in southwest China such as Yunnan, Guangxi, and Guizhou (Luo, 2018b:111). Put simply, it has been used metaphorically to "capture 'original' forms of life, both in the sense of nature and culture" (Luo, 2018a:72-73), which carry "connotations of the unaltered and intact" (Wu, 2014:165). That said, this neologism, with a focus on cultural economy, derives from exploiting the cultural practices and products of ethnic minorities, such as their folksong, dance, and instrument performances (e.g. Chen & Hung, 2019; Luo, 2018a; Wu, 2016), which are commonly perceived as "unpolished, authentic, grassroots, and, very importantly, nurtured by nature" (Luo, 2018b:111). In brief, *yuanshengtai* denotes a harmonious nature-and-culture coexistence in rural and underdeveloped ethnic minority regions (Luo, 2018a:69). For this reason, Chen and Hung (2019) argue that *yuanshengtai*, which depicts existing ethnic minorities as well as their cultures and practices in primordial forms, is a marker of authenticity. Kendall (2017) further argues that *yuanshengtai* belongs to a global discourse of cultural authenticity, specifically an authenticity of the original which denotes a harmonious coexistence of man with nature.

Essentially, what has fuelled the *yuanshengtai* trend is the Chinese state's concerns over the perceived loss of cultural traditions and values and its anxieties about urban lifestyles and environmental pollution in the rapidly changing Chinese society (Luo, 2018b). For this reason, the term *yuanshengtai* has also foregrounded "the causal relation between [ethnic minority] cultures and their geographic setting", both of which always impress people with a sense of pure, intact, and natural origins (Qiao, 1998, in Rees, 2016:57). In addition, the concerns about traditional culture loss and anxieties about environmental degradation have given rise to a new environmental movement to maintain biodiversity and sustainability in China (Hathaway, 2010). This movement is contemporaneous with the global trend of ethnic and cultural nationalism (Du, 2015) and cultural and natural heritage protection movement worldwide (Kendall, 2017; Luo, 2018a, 2018b). Against this backdrop, Du (2015) observes that *yuanshengtai* "can be both traditional and adaptive to the environment, original yet not primitive, and simultaneously local and global" (p.551). Put differently, it is a manifestation of China's harmony ideology, in this case, "the harmonies between men and nature, between minority performers and the Han audience, and between China and the world" (ibid., p.555). This explains why the state and local governments have actively engaged in the narrative formation and dissemination of *yuanshengtai*.

The multifaceted *yuanshengtai* narratives are tailored perfectly for ethnic minorities, especially given the long-standing perception that the minority groups' cultures and practices are traditional and primordial, along with their rural and natural habitats (e.g. Kendall, 2017; Luo, 2018a, 2018b; Wu J-T., 2016). That said, this new rhetoric has subtly shifted from categorizing ethnic minorities as less civilized and evolved to valorizing their nature-based knowledge and practices (Luo, 2018a). In this way, the innovative wedlock between nature, culture, and rurality matched by *yuangshengtai* falls squarely into the category of tourism featuring unspoiled ecosystems and cultural systems, which has been translated as the National Eco-Tourism Plan (2016-2025) (National Development and Reform Commission, 2016)[22].

Although being used to raise cultural and environmental awareness in an apolitical sense, the notions of *yuanshengtai* and authenticity — the defining features of ethno-and-ecotourism — also raise sociopolitical problems. That is, which ethnic groups and their cultural practices are *yuanshengtai* or *feiyuanshengtai* 非原生态 (*fei* means not) and authentic or inauthentic, and to what extent (e.g. Kendall, 2017; Luo, 2018a,

2018b)? The questions arise because the merged tourism of ethnicity and ecosystem is endorsed by both commercial enterprises and local and regional governments, thus being intertwined with local empowerment/disempowerment and identity politics (Luo, 2018a, 2018b; Wu J-T., 2016). Insomuch as, this hybrid tourism engenders a renewed ethnic hierarchy (e.g. Kendall, 2017). That is, the discursive and material (re)productions of *yuanshengtai* and authenticity for both ethnic representation and identification and economic benefits in the competitive cultural markets inevitably engage in China's political economy and the state's agendas regarding human-nature harmony and ethnic diversity in national unity. To illustrate, studies of *yuanshengtai* ethnic culture — the cultural practices, products, and performances of the ethnic minorities labelled with *yuanshengtai* as a selling point in the ethno-cum-ecotourism market in Southwest China — are a good case in point.

Chen and Hung (2019) examined the *yuangshengtai* performances in Lijiang, Yunnan, through observing an onsite show, collecting and analysing local archives regarding the promotion of the performances, and interviewing the local culture sector workers and residents. They refer to *yuanshengtai* performances mainly as "an authentic way to [represent and] experience ethnic minority cultures [...] by means of the collective performance of natural and cultural landscape" (pp.324-325). As such, ethnic minority groups and their cultures and natural habitats are portrayed as iconic characters and symbols for tourists' nostalgia for premodern and unpolluted lifestyle. In brief, *yuanshengtai* performance is "performing ethnic landscape" (p.336). Moreover, they argue that, through the creative linkage between ethnicity, culture, and nature, *a national self* — a collective Chinese identity underpinned by "emotional ties with the homeland, territory, language and culture" (Ho, 2006:452, in Chen & Hung, 2019:326) — is crafted and performed. This creation resonates with the Chinese concept of *home* which connotes "the myths and images of a primordial homeland to reinforce the depiction of the nation as an ancient community of belonging" (Kaiser, 2002:230, in Chen & Hung, 2019:326). Fei et al.'s (1992) explanation of Chinese society can shed some light on this connotation. That is, "Chinese society is fundamentally rural", which has grown out of its ties to the land (p.37). Building on this connotation, the *yuanshengtai* performances have reframed southwest borderland as a primitive and authentic realm (i.e. the homeland) in contrast to the modernized and urbanized society in the central areas mainly populated by the Han (see Image 2.1). Moreover, it has

reconfigured “a Chinese subject’s relationship to a borderland vis-à-vis home and homeland” (Chen & Hung, 2019:326). In brief, the notion of *yuanshengtai* bears a unified sense of Chineseness. They conclude that, on the one hand, the *yuanshengtai* performances, as a staged space by the cultural enterprises and tourism sectors for national identification, demonstrates “how the state exercises cultural governance through the representation of ethnicity” (ibid., p.333); on the other, the performances have also created a new model of market economy leading to local development or on the contrary further impoverishment of certain communities.

In contrast, Du (2015) argues that the *yuanshengtai* framework, with its focus on culture and economy instead of being political, allows both the state and ethnic minorities to promote their own versions of ethnic identities and cultural representations. Du’s argument is informed by her analysis of the Impression Series performances (e.g. “Impression Lijiang” 印象丽江, “Dynamic Yunnan” 云南映象) — an elite-created “primitive and authentic” art staged in Yunnan. In a nutshell, the *yuanshengtai* framework manifests a depoliticized approach to state-minority relationships “in the name of respecting, preserving, and reviving traditional ethnic culture” (p.562). That said, Du contends that the “modern Han versus primitive minorities” binary is still traceable in the *yuanshengtai* package of ethnic minority representations. In this new package, the primitiveness of minority cultures has been attributed with “new sensibility and socio-economic values of authenticity” (p.555). Viewed in this light, the *yuanshengtai* discourses function as a dual-track management, as China has increasingly engaged in international affairs. That is, it helps to reconcile the rising need for ethnic diversity and the underlying agenda of national unity.

Resonating with Du (2015), Luo (2018a, 2018b) also observes that the *yuanshengtai* rhetoric valorises a romanticized marriage of ethnic cultural practices and ecological habitats. As such, it allows cultural and political elites to construct unique provincial identity and boost economic growth while complying with the state’s agenda of *unity in diversity* (see 2.3.1.1) and its global aspirations. This observation derives from Luo’s ethnographic study of the *yuanshengtai* events held in Guizhou. Luo explored and analysed how *yuanshengtai* was constructed and disseminated through the interplay between academia, cultural industry, and the media. In contrast to Du’s (2015) argument for *yuanshengtai* being insensitive to politics, Luo asserts that the construction and promotion of *yuanshengtai* capitalizing on ecological and ethnic

resources actually thrive on “bureaucratic rationales and institutional networks” (2018a:91). That is, the *yuanshengtai* framework is political in nature.

Focusing on ethnic aural resources, Wu Jinting (2016) conducted 16-month long ethnographic research in a village in Guizhou, mainly inhabited by the Kam people (Dong 侗 in Chinese). This research examined how environmental-cultural tourism marketized and altered the local ethnic singing and meanwhile relandscaped the rural environment for tourist imaginaries. Wu has found two controversial aspects embedded in this tourism. On the one hand, Kam ethnic songs, whose lyrics involve mountains, birds, plants, other life forms, farming, seasons, and spirits, have been sung in the Kam language for centuries to pass down the Kam people’s ecological ethics, religious beliefs, and practical knowledge. For this reason, they are the selling point of the local tourism industry. On the other hand, the local governments collaborating with commercial sector legitimize consumption of minority culture and promote tourism through reconfiguring the rural-ethnic landscape for economic development. As a result, the core values embedded in Kam ethnic singing, namely the Kam people’s ecological consciousness and knowledges, are neglected or backgrounded in the repackage of ethnic representations, along with the relandscaped rural environment. That means, in this case, the cultural and natural attributes of ethnic minorities are subject to regional economic development.

A similar contradiction is also observed by Kendall (2017, see 2.3.1), who argues that the booming urbanization entraining tourism and infrastructure “threatens the existence of what could be considered *yuanshengtai*, but it is this same threat that makes *yuanshengtai* valuable and accessible” (p.100). That means, this contradiction reinforces the connotation of *yuanshengtai* — “rural place as a nurturer of authentic cultural practices and genuine minorities” (p.108). Viewed from this perspective, both Wu J-T. (2016) and Kendall (2017) assert that the geographic locations where ethnic cultural practices are conducted play a decisive though also ambivalent role in the *yuanshengtai* discourses. Specifically, the geographic/spatial aspect of *yuanshengtai* discourses allows the peripheral border areas, once being marginalized as backward and primitive (e.g. Yunnan, Guizhou), to foreground their natural-cultural distinctiveness and brand their regional identities. As a result, the border regions can negotiate their place in the “political and economic vehicles” of the state (Luo, 2018a:75).

In sum, the *yuanshengtai* discourses, which features ethnic minority cultures, ecological consciousness, and natural environment, embodies an ideological shift regarding ethnicity in contemporary China. It has created a "depoliticized" and almost "magicalized" space to satisfy multiscale interests, though not evenly, and to address the conflict between culture and nature conservation and economic development. Fundamentally, it serves to maintain China's domestic stability through reinforcing a unified national identity, to achieve ethnic harmony via creating a space for the co-existence of ethnic traditions and culture located in a rural environment and the modernization and urbanization of Han Chinese culture, and to foster China's global engagement by attending to ethnic diversity, natural environment, and cultural heritage.

Notably, the *yuanshengtai* rhetoric has also boosted another niche branch of the tourism sector. That is, *gastronomic/culinary tourism* (e.g. Long, 2004; Wood & Muñoz, 2007), which refers to intentionally engaging in "the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system not one's own" (Long, 2004:21). Located in the Chinese context, especially in the ethnic minority areas, culinary tourism features *yuanshengtai* ethnic foods and materializes as (rural) ethnic restaurants. Given that food plays a vital role in manipulating the natural environment and opens a window into the histories, ethos, and identities of the specific cultures attached to that environment (Long, 2004:24), it is not surprising that ethnic foods and foodways have gained some, though limited, currency in the *yuanshengtai* flow (e.g. Klein, 2018; Wu, 2003, 2004, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). Moreover, this research was conducted in an ethnic culture themed restaurant though located outside of the rural ethnic region, and undoubtably it is a subfield that needs exploration.

3.3.3 Ethnic hospitality and culinary authenticity

Food can function as a distinctive ethnic identifier. According to Wu (2016a), "[f]oods and foodways serve as vehicles for meanings of all kinds (Mintz, 2001:274) and can help express and construct individual and group identities, such as interpersonal relations or membership in a social class or ethnic group (Cheung, 2001:83; Lefferts, 2005)" (p.421). The concept of foodways suggest that "food is a network of activities and systems — physical, social (communicative), cultural, economic, spiritual, and aesthetic" (Long,

2004:23). Furthermore, like any other cultural representation, food is "multivocal and polysemic, and new meanings can be recognized in new contexts" (ibid., p.35). In this sense, ethnic-themed restaurants[5] where foods and foodways are repacked and reproduced for commercial purposes are seen as informal but powerful ambassadors for these meanings as well as the culture and identity they represent (e.g. Chatzopoulou, 2023; Wu, 2014, 2016a, 2016b).

For this reason, ethnic themed restaurants are seen as culinary tourism which provides consumers with an accessible gateway to the "exotic" (Wood & Muñoz, 2007). To fulfil the mission, these restaurants have adopted various strategies, among which communicating authenticity is one of the most essential (Chatzopoulou, 2023; Long, 2004; Tuxun, 2022). During this strategy implementation, ethnicity is always represented by its most striking cultural markers (e.g. ingredients, cooking practices, ethic clothing and performances), to facilitate consumption of the "exotic" (Wood & Muñoz, 2007). That means, the term *authenticity*

> encodes the expectation of truthful representation. It is concerned with the identity of persons and groups, the authorship of products, producers, and cultural practices, the categorical boundaries of society: 'who' or 'what' *is* 'who' or 'what' claims to be (Theodossopoulos, 2013:339, originally emphasized).

That said, this concept has been continuously problematized for its multidimensional and sometimes overlapping or controversial meanings (e.g. Beer, 2008; Molz, 2004; Theodossopoulos, 2013; Weiss, 2011). For example, authenticity is defined as a relative, interpreted, and socially constructed notion, which "involves various perspectives, value statements, judgments, stereotypes, and spatial and socio-political influences" (Yang & Wall, 2009a:251). This definition, though recognizing the social-constructionist nature of authenticity, also implies that authenticity is a perception of

[5] Note that, in many contexts, the term *ethnic/ethnic-themed restaurants* is more in the country-specific/national sense to set immigrant groups such as the Chinese, Korean, Thai, and Australian in America (e.g. Long, 2004; Lu et al., 2015; Molz, 2004; Wood & Muñoz , 2007) or the Greek in the UK (e.g. Chatzopoulou, 2023) — a foreign culture and cuisine — apart from "natives" where these restaurants locate. By contrast, this research aligns with Fenton (2003), among others, and refers to ethnic/ethnic-themed restaurants as those run by ethnic (minority) groups or themed with their cultures, who are socio-culturally different from the majority group *within* a state.

cultures (e.g. Chatzopoulou, 2023; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Lu et al., 2015; Wang, 1999). That is, it is also a subjective interpretation resting on individuals' experiences.

This is also true in the case of food and cuisine. Aware of the loose edges of the term authenticity as well as the flexible and dynamic nature of cuisine, Weiss (2011) asserts that *gastronomic/culinary authenticity* is a "soft" concept. It oftentimes refers to "the appropriateness of linking a specific ingredient, technique or recipe, or a relation between dishes or between a wine and a dish, to a particular time and place" (ibid., p.74). When located in a restaurant, it concerns with the people engaged in the authentication process, the origin of ingredients, the preparation, presentation, and consumption of food/dishes, as well as atmosphere and service of the restaurant (Chatzopoulou, 2023; Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Tuxun, 2022). This definition rejects the understanding that an authentic food/dish is fixed in time, space, and form. Rather, an authentic dish is "a set of variants of recipes — constantly revised, constantly shifting — distributed over a delimited geographic region" (Weiss, 2011:76). As such, echoing Bucholtz (2003) (see 3.3.1), Weiss (2011) argues that authenticity is a dynamic notion, which varies spatially and temporally.

Given this understanding, Weiss suggests that the proper question to ask about authenticity is not "Is it authentic?" but "*How* is it authentic?" (p.77, originally emphasized). Regarding ethnic-themed restaurants, this question is specified: "How do different agents link cultural production to particular times and places as a way to evidence authenticity?" and "How do variables such as capital, ethnicity, and locality play out in defining and contesting the authenticity of so-called ethnic cuisine?" (Tuxun, 2022:60). To buttress Weiss (2011), Strohl (2019) argues that it is also important to interpret authenticity with reasons for valuing it. That is, to add to Weiss's how question, "*Why* do people care about authenticity?" (emphasized by me). The reviewed empirical studies as follows illustrate how social factors are packed into the marketing and branding ethnic minority foods and cuisines in China, entrained by sociopolitical agendas, such as tourism, migration, and regional development.

Tuxun (2022) conducted an ethnographic study at a Uyghurs restaurant in Shanghai featuring Xinjiang culture and food to trace the creation, consumption, and identification of Xinjiang food outside Uyghurs regions. Tuxun has found that the idea of authentic Xinjiang food is claimed, interpreted, and expressed by different agents

engaged in the restaurant in question. For example, the restaurant managers believe that the authenticity of a Xinjiang restaurant involves presenting what customers expect and imagine authentic Xinjiang food to be like and presenting Uyghur staff as "exotic others" (through traditional ways of cooking, dancing and singing performances, traditional Uyghurs custom and clothing). That said, they also adapt the restaurant to local palates and culinary categories, such as serving customers with Westernised utensils to fit itself in the cosmopolitan metropolis. As for customers, they expect the "exotic" ethnicity of Uyghurs and regard it as an essential part of the authentic Xinjiang cuisine package. For Uyghur employees, it is more complicated to establish food authenticity given corruption in the business of hospitality, ethnic outsiders' lack of religious understanding, and trust issues, especially regarding halal standards. That is why, for Muslim customers, the Uyghur staff becomes the primary criterion of authenticity at Xinjiang restaurants. In sum, Tuxun, echoing Weiss (2011) and Yang and Wall (2009a), concludes that authenticity is "fluid and refracted through location and situation, which reflects a broader picture of migration, ethnicity, and class" (p.66). Specifically, the rising of Xinjiang restaurants in the Chinese big cities epitomises how ethnic minority cultural representations are reproduced and transformed into potential economic value by both the minority insiders and outsiders. Entrained by this process, locality and ethnicity are reshaped into delimited and market-driven forms, insomuch that the authenticity of ethnic minority food is muffled by capital, ethnicity, locality, and class.

Regarding the foodways in their original locations, Wu (2016b) also argues that local foods in ethnic minority areas are meaningful and multifunctional at the local, national and even global scales. That said, an attempt to relocate a minority food into wider social contexts may depend on whether its symbolic status is successfully repositioned, which involves reimaging, repackaging, and standardizing food and cuisines, as well as promoting positive discourses in the media. During this process, restaurants serving local and minority foods can be used as "meaning carriers and transformers" (Wu, 2014:159, 2016a). For example, since the early 2010s, the marriage of ethnic foods and cuisines, ethno-tourism through the *yuanshengtai* rhetoric, and booming hospitality industry in the rural China (i.e. *nongjiale* 农家乐) has given rise to a new genre of consumption.

Nongjiale is a type of culinary tourism, in which tourists can consume foods produced and cooked in rural areas mainly by Han farmers, as well as experiencing rural work and enjoying the rural scenery. For this reason, it connotes being organic, ecological, healthy, and in a sense a return to nature (Wu, 2016a). When relocated in rural and ethnic minority areas, it is repacked, with a *yuangshengtai* label, as the consumption of rurality, ethnicity, and nature. This new dining genre is created to meet the diners' expectations and imagination, mainly those from urban areas who are nostalgic about rural life (see 3.3.2) and curious about ethnic minorities. For this reason, what this culinary experience tries to present to customers is that "the foods consumed are original rural fare, the people who produce them are minority others and the environmental landscape where they are produced and consumed is ecologically sound and healthy" (Wu, 2014:159). To investigate how this new genre of consumption plays out, Wu (2014, 2016a, 2016b) conducted anthropological fieldwork in three ethnic minority villages in Yunnan and Hubei provinces. All these villages were funded either by the UN CCDPF (China Culture and Development Partnership Framework) project[23] or the Chinese government (e.g. the New Countryside program) to construct local restaurants and promote tourism in the 2000s.

Specifically, the De'ang people in Yunnan have their own language, costumes, architecture, rituals, traditions, and history, thus loaded with ethnic markers, but their traditional foods are notorious for being "stinky" (e.g. reeked and rotten meat). To cater for the tourists, the De'ang restaurants downplay the original local dishes, based on the standards set by the local government and the CCDPF project. In contrast, in the Tujia and the Dong villages in Hubei, the local people "copy and adopt" other ethnic minorities' symbols from other places to construct their own ethnic restaurants and other cultural representations. It is because the local people's ethnic status was assigned by the Ethnic Minority Classification project at the inception of the PRC (see 2.2.3), thus with little local symbols to represent their ethnicity. Wu (2014, 2016a) therefore argues that the symbolic constructions of ethnicity involve the exercise of multiscale powers, usually out the ethnic minorities' control. As such, the *yuanshengtai* restaurants in rural ethnic minority areas, which revalorise rurality, ecosystem, and ethnicity, act as meaning and symbol converters and eventually result in "the intertwining and enmeshment of landscape, ethnic symbols and the politics of identity"

(Wu, 2014:172). In other words, the new genre of ethnic culinary tourism is a sociopolitical product.

Similarly, Klein (2018) conducted an ethnographic investigation into the production, marketing, and consumption of *rubing* in Shilin Yi Autonomous County, a UNESCO world heritage site. *Rubing* 乳饼 (a goat milk cheese) is a traditional local food in Yunnan. Aligning with Wu (2014), Klein contends that the heritagization of local foods in China is fuelled by a nostalgic craze — especially that of urbanites' — for an imagined rural past. The imagined past features the environmental purity of the impoverished and mountainous ethnic minority areas and the dietary health linking to farmer-made and hand-crafted foods, thus being authentic, ecological, natural and trustworthy. Furthermore, the reinventing and branding of *rubing* in Yunnan are mobilized by the interplay between a food heritagization trend worldwide and the Chinese state's project of agricultural modernization.

What makes the two seemly conflicting practices (heritagization versus modernization) merge is that "food quality of specific landscapes and ethnicities has often been compatible with the celebration of modern, industrial processes" in China (p.80). This compatibility derives from the food safety concerns widely shared by customers. For example, ethnic minority foods such as rotten meat, raw paddy fish, and ant eggs, have long been associated with negative connotations (e.g. "stinky", "barbarian", "unhygienic") which are rooted in public discourse and historical documents (Wu, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). For this reason, modernization and standardization of ethnic minority foods and cuisines help consumers to accept the foods more easily. In this sense, the food heritagization which involves reinventing traditional local foodways is sponsored by the state as part of its macro interventions in rural development.

Apart from the involvement of global and national forces, the intertwined practices of heritagization and modernization, coupled with the local governments' support to expand the cultural markets for local speciality foods, have also created opportunities for individuals such as smallholders and farmers. That said, the branding and marketing of *rubing* as an exemplar of locality, ethnicity, and rurality also involves ambivalence about identification with certain ethnic minority groups. Specifically, the association between *rubing* production and the Sani people (a subgroup of the Yi people) in Shilin is not fully embraced, especially among the Yunnan local people. Rather, they commonly

associate *rubing* with the Bai people in Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan, who are regarded as civilized rice-cultivators and townsfolk while the Sani as "greedy" (Klein, 2018:81). The association, as observed by Klein, manifests the deep-seated regional and ethnic hierarchical divisions.

In sum, the existing research into authenticity in ethnic minority food and hospitality has unpacked how multiscale powers and ethnic minority insiders and outsiders intertwine in the reconstruction and reproduction of ethnic cultural representations. Furthermore, multi-scale social agents use the authenticity discourse in service of economic development, political purposes, social mobility, as well as identity (re)formation and community bonding. Aligning with the researchers above, this research conducted ethnographic inquiry in a Dai culture themed restaurant in Yunnan. It aims to investigate especially how the restaurant creators' perceptions of authenticity have impacted them in the design and making of the restaurant, and how these perceptions have been framed in the sociocultural context and by political-economic factors.

Despite the similar constructionist approach to ethnic minority hospitality shared by the above-mentioned researchers and me, I adopt a sociosemiotic ethnographic lens to interpret ethnicity in the Chinese context, focusing on cultural representations and authenticating practices. In fact, a sociosemiotic approach to authenticity in marketing is not new. My reason for adopting social semiotics to study ethnicity in Yunnan lies in its capacity to, firstly, attend to all forms of meaning making with various semiotic resources (e.g. Kress, 2010), and secondly unpack the multiscale interplay in social or multi-semiotic practices and processes (see 4.2). Yin et al.'s (2019) research on the development of Yunnan achieved by incorporating an environmental and ecological dimension buttresses the imperative of a sociosemiotic ethnographic lens. They argue that the development projects implemented in Yunnan are entangled in complex negotiations between "the state's ambition of socio-political assimilation, the volatility of the market and the agency of local people" (p.145). Moreover, they add that development at the frontier is embedded in local contingencies, contextual conditions, as well as relations between social and natural worlds. In sum, the (re)construction and representation of ethnicity in Yunnan entrained by the national and regional development agendas involves multi-scale social forces and actors, as well as cultural and natural resources. That means, a context-specific and critical ethnographic approach sharpens the theoretical lens of social semiotics to explore the specific

sociopolitical contexts and trace the interplay between microlevel actors, regional government and institutions, and the state in ethnicity (re)construction (see Chapter 4).

3.3.4 Summary

In this section, I have reviewed the literature concerning the multi-semiotic resources as ethnic markers, which are capitalized on or marginalized in the political-economic market in current China, including eco-ethnic tourism and ethnic food and hospitality. Limited research has explored the multi-semiotic resources entangled in the interplay between sociopolitical and economic factors and individual agency from a sociosemiotic perspective, though ethnographic approaches are widely adopted. Aware of this lacuna, this research approaches the (re)construction of ethnic culture and identity in China through the lens compounded of social semiotics and ethnography. It is elaborated in Chapter 4.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter reviews literature of language ideologies and individuals' language choices, and multi-semiotic resources as ethnic markers which are entrained by the political-economic market in China (e.g. ethno-ecotourism). The review, buttressing the argumentation of Chapter 2, reveals that ethnic languages are not the only defining marker of ethnicity and ethnic cultures and identity are (re)constructed by sociopolitical and economic factors as well as microlevel actors. That said, this chapter has identified scare attention to the structure-agency dynamics in the existing literature, and thus it argues to explore multi-semiotic resources as ethnic representations and the entangled sociocultural and political-economic factors. The research questions proposed in 1.1 and 4.6 can guide this study to achieve that end. The questions are framed in the theoretical framework of social semiotics and navigated by an ethnographic approach. That means, before attending to the research questions, it is necessary to explore *why* and *how* social semiotics attached with an ethnographic lens serves to examine the (re)construction of ethnicity.

Chapter 4 Theoretical framework

4.1 Introduction

Ethnicity, from a social constructionist perspective, is dynamic, fluid, situated, volitional, and contestable, of which culture and identity are fundamental building blocks (Nagel, 1994). That means, culture and identity contribute to the (re)production of ethnic meaning and the (re)construction of ethnic boundaries. Kress (2010) elucidates that meaning- and sensemaking practices/semiosis, including ethnic meaning (re)making, are "constantly altered, modified, as is all of culture, in line with and as an effect of social changes" (p.7; see also Street, 1993). In this sense, in the continuous process of culture, both meaning- and sense-makers and social systems are at play. As for ethnic identification, Buccellati (2010) argues that it rests on "shared recognition of specific signs" within an ethic group and also by outsiders, because what these signs signify derives from and meanwhile supports the sense of group identity through time (p.80). That means, an ethnic marker or a sign acquires its distinctive attributes across time by, on the one hand, distinguishing from the identifiers of another group and on the other, sharing similarities with other signs within a system. As such, this system forms an ethnic bond which rests on shared cultural traits and provides group members with markers of identity (ibid.). In brief, signs shared within an ethnic group attach distinct meaning to that group and thus demarcate its cultural boundaries, though fluid and contestable. Ethnicity (re)construction in China, as identified in 2.3 and Chapter 3, manifests the multi-semiotic and multiscale nature of ethnic culture and identity formation.

To better interpret multi-semiotic and socially constructed practices and processes of ethnicity (re)construction, a theoretical lens with its focal point on social semiotics is framed and presented in this chapter. The theory of Social Semiotics, attending to meaning in all forms within a specific sociocultural context, serves the purpose of exploring ethnicity. To illustrate, 4.2 sets out what social semiotics is, its core concepts, and its capacities to deal with meaning- and sensemaking practices and agency-structure dynamics embedded in these practices. Following that, 4.3 elucidates a compound framework of social semiotics and constructionist ethnography to explore ethnicity. For a context-specific understanding of ethnicity in China, the theoretical

framework is situated within the sociocultural, historical, political, and economic contexts in the multi-ethnic minority region in Yunnan (see 4.4). Finally, informed by the literature review regarding ethnicity in Chapter 3 and equipped with the proposed theoretical lens, this chapter concludes by outlining the specific questions that this research sets out to address.

4.2 Ethnicity through the lens of social semiotics

Facing a multi-semiotic world continuously being (re)constructed through meaning- and sensemaking, Kress (2010) advances a theory — Social Semiotics — that is interested in "*meaning* in all its appearances, in all social occasions and in all cultural sites" (p.2, originally emphasized). To approach meaning in various forms or modes, social semiotics commits to *semiosis* — the (re)making of meaning in social (inter)actions with all forms of semiotic resources (Kress, 2010; Jessop, 2008), including the interactions between materiality, symbolism, and meaning; and between *signs* (i.e. an integrated whole of modes and meanings), semiotic practices, and extra-semiotic conditions (Kress, 2010, 2011; Vannini, 2004, 2007). *Mode*, according to Kress (2010), is "a socially shaped and culturally given resource for meaning-making" (p.79). As such, modes are both embedded in and shaped by specific cultures across time and are shared by members of a cultural community and recognizable to outsiders (e.g. Kress, 2010, 2011). In this sense, both *meaning* and *resources* in and for social (inter)actions in specific environments are core concepts of social semiotics, with *culture* as its anchor.

As the anchor of both social semiotics and ethnicity, *culture* accordingly refers to

> a social, durable, layered pattern of cognitive and normative systems that are at once material and ideal, objective and subjective, embodied in artifacts and embedded in behavior, passed about in interaction, internalized in personalities, and externalized in institutions (see Berger and Luckmann 1966; Durkheim 1965a, 1965b, 1966; Geertz 1973; Parsons 1968; Wuthnow 1987) (Hays,1994:65).

That means, culture is socially constructed systems of meaning that individuals in groups create and remake when they interact with each other, with other groups, and with the physical environment in which they are located (Hays,1994; LeCompte &

Schensul, 2010). Notably, individuals of an ethnic group do not just share ancestry or inherit cultures — as primordial attributes, but instead they "*elaborate these into the idea of a community founded upon these attributes*" (Fenton, 2010:3, originally emphasized). In other words, apart from social contexts and systems, social actors' agency also plays an essential role in the (re)construction of ethnic cultural markers.

Given this understanding, social semiotics is not only interested in semiotic resources and practices for (re)making meaning but also attends to social factors and actors intertwined with the interactive processes (e.g. Kress, 2010). Or in Hodge and Kress's (1988) words, the central concern of social semiotics is the complex interrelationship between "texts and contexts, agents and objects of meaning, social structures and forces" (p.viii). That is why a sociosemiotic perspective serves the purpose of exploring ethnicity in the Chinese context, the (re)construction of which involves multi-semiotic resources and signs (see 4.2.1) and the interplay between multiscale forces and actors (see 4.2.2).

4.2.1 Meaning- and sense-making as multi-semiotic practices

To attend to ever-expanding semiotic resources mobilized and (re)made in and for semiosis in today's world, an umbrella term is needed. For this reason, Pennycook (2017b) calls for "a way of grasping the relationships among a range of forms of semiosis" instead of merely adding more semiotic items to translinguistic inventories (p.269). Against this backdrop, the concept of *semiotic assemblage* is adopted. It refers to "an emergent property deriving from the interactions between people, artefacts and space" (Pennycook, 2017b:279; also Pennycook, 2019, 2021, 2022a, 2024), which is shaped by constrains and potentials of a given social context (Kusters, 2021). In brief, an *assemblage* is a whole whose properties emerge when its parts are contingently aggregated, mixed, or composed (DeLanda, 2006:6, in Dovey, 2010:16). Located in semiosis, assemblages are entangled groupings of semiotic resources including material elements, which "allow for an appreciation of the ways in which different trajectories of people, semiotic resources and objects meet at particular moments and places" (Pennycook, 2021:111). Given this understanding, Pennycook (2017b) argues that the notion of semiotic assemblage "expands the semiotic inventory and relocates

repertoires in the dynamic relations among objects, places and linguistic [sic] resources" (p.279). *Repertoires*, according to Gumperz (1964), are "any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction over a significant span of time and set off from other such aggregates by differences in the frequency of interaction" (p.137).

The idea of aggregate thus echoes that of assemblage, both deriving from social interactions situated in time and space and involved in a process of *enregisterment*. According to Agha (2007), *enregisterment* is "processes and practices whereby performable signs become recognized (and regrouped) as belonging to distinct, differentially valorized semiotic registers by a population" (p.81, in Bagga-Gupta & Carneiro, 2021:327). That means, although all semiotic resources in a particular space and time are potential communicative resources, many may not be salient for specific interactions and be enregistered (Canagarajah, 2021). In this sense, semiotic repertoires emerge from dynamic and spatial-temporal interactions, during which only the resources mobilized and regularized in and for representation and communication are registered. The regularized and registered semiotic resources within a given social context provide both affordances and constraints for the materialization of certain semiotic assemblages/aggregates.

Note that the notion of semiotic assemblage premises that semiotic resources and signs can be resemiotized and are translatable (e.g. Hawkins, 2018; Iedema, 2001, 2003; Jakobson, 1959; Kress, 2010, 2011; Lotringer, 1978). For example, Kress (2010) asserts that "signs are always newly *made* in social interaction; signs are motivated, not *arbitrary* relations of meaning and form" (p.54, originally emphasized). Hawkins (2018) echoes Kress, claiming that semiotic resources are "embedded and given meaning within the specific assemblage, and within trajectories of time and space, continuously shifting and re-shaping in their contexts and mobility" (p.64). In brief, Lotringer (1978) contends that everything can be a sign in trans-semiotics and therefore translatable.

To illustrate, Iedema (2001) explored how specialized ways of talking and writing were transformed/translated and transposed into architectural design form, as a result of the interplay between semiotic systems and extra-semiotic forces during an organizational planning project. He argues that intersemiotic translations occur not only between different semiotic systems but also between these systems and their materialities. That

means, intersemiotic translations (or resemiotization, see below) involve the translation of meaning from one context to another (i.e. a *recontextualization* process) and from one semiotic mode to another (i.e. *transmodality*, Hawkins, 2018). Iedema illustrated how social practices (e.g. institutional meetings) were transformed/translated into discourse (e.g. written documents) and then discourses (e.g. written architectural designs) materialized as objects (e.g. printed written texts) or social practices (e.g. the implementation of the architectural design). In this sense, as van Leeuwen (2008) argues, *discourse* is a "recontextualized social practice", always being a sequence of semiotic activities (pp.3-12).

Based on his intersemiotic/trans-semiotic analysis, Iedema (2003) proposes the notion of *resemiotization*. It concerns with "how meaning making shifts from context to context, from practice to practice, or from one stage of a practice to the next" (ibid., p.41). Viewed in this light, inter-semiotic translation makes the multimodal nature of and the resemiotization potential of semiotic resources central to the sociosemiotic analysis of semiosis. For this reason, Iedema urges that sociosemiotic analysis "should be complemented with a dynamic view on semiosis" (p.30). That is, how various semiotic resources come together or *assemble* in a particular time and space as part of a larger translation/ resemiotization process of social practices (e.g. semiosis).

Echoing Ideama (2001, 2003), Otsuji and Pennycook (2023) contend that the idea of resemiotization helps to understand the circulation of discourses which mobilizes and (de)valorises different semiotic resources across artefacts and social practices. Moreover, they argue that the notions of *semiotic assemblage* and *reassemblage* — "where a new pattern of assemblage is about to form" — enable to explore how these resources assemble/reassemble at different stages in resemiotization processes (ibid., p.10). These concepts together thus respond to Ideama's (2003) call above.

In this sense, the notion of semiotic (re)assemblage is actually akin to Li's (e.g. 2011, 2018a, 2018b) *translanguaging space*, one created through and for translanguaging practices. It is a space where various semiotic (i.e. multilingual, multisensory, and multimodal) resources and repertoires interact and produce new meanings collaboratively, and where speakers "bring together different dimensions of their personal history, experience and environment, their attitude, belief and ideology, their cognitive and physical capacity into coordinated and meaningful performance"

(2011:1223; Zhu et al., 2017). Nevertheless, this approach to social spaces as locus of semiosis remains centrally on the interplay between individuals and resources, with an emphasis on individuals' *translanguaging instinct* and capacity (see also Pennycook & Otsuji, 2014). Individuals' translanguaging instincts are their "natural drive to combine all available cognitive, semiotic, sensory, and modal resources in language learning and language use" (Li, 2018b:25), which materializes through their languaging practices. That means, social structure is largely backgrounded.

By contrast, the emergence of a semiotic assemblage in a given social space, through which certain repertoires are valued, degraded, or even marginalized, requires an understanding of how the power exercise manifest in this process. For instance, by examining street art (e.g. graffiti), Pennycook (2009) argues that "[t]he styles and locations of signs are about identity, they are statements of place, belonging, group membership, and style" (p.309). For this reason, Pennycook (2022a) asserts that the idea of semiotic assemblages facilitates a critical understanding of *artification* — a social semiotic event which depends on material, contextual, and symbolic relations. That is, it provides an analytical lens to examining how art, the street, politics, economy, artists and viewers are intertwined to construct meanings and politics in street art.

Nevertheless, despite Pennycook's (2022a) use of artification to explore "the symbolic, material, and contextual processes by which something becomes art" through a sociosemiotic lens (p.564), the street artists' own voice, as well as viewers' (except in Pennycook's (2009) research, he interviewed a priest who was both the property owner and a viewer), is missing. Vannini (2007) argues that "the multiplicity of voices, codes, meanings, discourses, and values that inform signification (Bakhtin, 1965/1984, 1975/1981, 1979/1986; Volosinov, 1973)" is essential to understand the diverse political underpinnings and consequences in a particular sociosemiotic system (p.122). This may explain why the individuals' agency in the artification process is mainly interpreted as, in Pennycook's (2022a) own words, "appropriation, rebellion, and transgression" — synonyms for resistance. This interpretation of agency and social forces embodies a dichotomous view.

Johnson (2023) points out that in social theory and various disciplines, such as language policy and planning, applied and educational linguistics, and environmental studies, the dynamics between structure and agency is often underspecified or misidentified as a

reductive dichotomous relationship. For example, “language policy is portrayed as the hegemonic structure while agency is described as a reaction to that structure, which takes the form of individual free will [..., and thus] often used as a synonym for resistance” (p.29; see also Hays, 1994). Aligning with Johnson (2023), scholars from a sociosemiotic perspective (e.g. Fairclough et al., 2002; Kress, 2010, 2011; Vanni, 2004, 2007) pay special attention to the agency-structure interplay embedded in social practices (e.g. semiosis) and processes and assert that they are mutually engaged (see 4.2.2).

4.2.2 Sociosemiotic lens attentive to structure-agency dynamics

For socio-semioticians, their primary concerns are semiotic resources and signs and their actual (re)use in social contexts. In other words, they commit to exploring what are or could be semiotic resources and signs and their past, present, and possible future uses, and examining how they are used in specific historical, cultural, and sociopolitical contexts and how people perceive them in these contexts (van Leeuwen, 2005:3-5). Given this commitment, social semiotics recognizes *the social* — including agentive individuals and generative social power — as the origin and source of meaning (Kress, 2010, 2011; Vannini, 2007; Volosinov, 1973). That means, what is embedded in the social nature of multi-semiotic meaning- and sensemaking is the dynamics between individuals’ agency and social forces. Given this recognition, Fairclough et al. (2002) argue that semiosis “cannot be understood without identifying and exploring the extra-semiotic conditions that make semiosis possible and secure its effectivity” (p.4). *Extra-semiotic conditions* include “both the overall configuration of specific semiotic action contexts and the complexities of the natural and social world in which any and all semiosis occurs” (Jessop, 2004:163). For a better understanding of the role of agency and social power in multi-semiotic encounters, the following two sections attend to them respectively.

4.2.2.1 Generative social power

The social-constructionist interpretation of semiosis echoes Volosinov's (1973) argument for the generative power of social structure. That is, "the form of signs is conditioned above all by the social organization of the participants involved and also by the immediate conditions of their interaction" (ibid., p.21). Therefore, semiotic resources and signs "may not be divorced from the concrete forms of social intercourse [...] and cannot exist, as such, outside it" (ibid.). For this reason, they are "a phenomenon of the external world" or ideological products (ibid., pp.9-15), and hence culture, society, and politics are intrinsic to semiosis (Hodge & Kress, 1988:18). That means, semiotic resources and signs for and through semiosis are "socially made and therefore carry the discernible regularities of social occasions, events, and hence a certain stability" (Kress, 2010:8). Kress (2011) furthers this argument by specifying semiosis as *social semiosis*, that is, "the making [and remaking] of meaning in social environments" (p.241), which is context-bound and conflict-laden (Vannini, 2004, 2007). In sum, agency and social forces, which are intertwined in the sociopolitical and spatial-temporal dynamics, shape semiotic resources and signs for semiosis and also play out in multi-semiotic encounters.

While the role of social forces is largely recognized in the literature, sparse attention has been paid to its generative capacity. Especially viewed from the lens of social justice, possibilities and potentials for multi-semiotic encounters afforded by social systems, no matter how limited they are, are simply overlooked and instead resistance to social norms is greatly applauded (Hawkins, 2018; Johnson, 2023). Though the social justice argument is important, especially in a moral sense, its undertone of resistance does not necessarily help overcome social hierarchies but may perpetuate them. A case in point is Paul Willis's (1978) ethnographic research, in which he observed a group of working-class boys in an English industrial town as they passed through the last two years of school and into work. He found that these boys recognized the social inequality facing them and thus developed their own culture of opposition. However, this resistance to the social rules and values of the school, as Willis argued, fell short of challenging the social order but rather buttressed the status quo. In the same vein, Hodge and Kress (1988) observe that

> [a]n excessive concentration on normative systems [...] contains an inbuilt distortion and reinforces the ideas of their dominance. These systems only constrain the behaviour and beliefs of the non-dominant in so far as they have been effectively imposed and have not been effectively resisted. [...] So the meanings and the interests of both dominant and non-dominant act together in proportions that are not predetermined, to constitute the forms and possibilities of meaning at every level. We do not assume that resistance is always successful or potent: but nor do we take it for granted [...] that resistance is always effortlessly incorporated and rendered non-significant (pp.7-8).

This position acknowledges that "the human is neither an actor essentially possessed of agency, nor a passive product or puppet of cultural forces" (Rose, 1996:189, in Pitt, 2010:183). Rather, *human agency* "is produced in the course of practices under a whole variety of more or less onerous, explicit, punitive or seductive disciplinary or passional constraints and relations of forces" (ibid.). Viewed in this light, the complex dynamics between agency and social structure are recognized, instead of the deep-seated assumption that the latter simply imposes on the former from above. Exactly how individuals engage and exercise agency in the (re)making of semiotic resources and signs and in the multi-semiotic (inter)actions is elaborated below.

4.2.2.2 Agentive social actors

Social semiotics posits that semiotic resources for cultural representation, or signs, are always made and remade in social (inter)actions. The (re)making is based on the sign-(re)makers' needs and assessment of the situated environment, and in accordance with the social structure and power relations of the specific context where semiosis occurs (Kress, 2010, 2011). In this sense, *making* and *remaking* indicate a maker/designer of signs (Kress, 2010), and therefore agency is acknowledged and centralized. That means, from a sociosemiotic perspective, sign-makers are agentive and generative individuals in sign-, meaning-, and sensemaking. Given this stance, social semioticians ask: "What meaning is being made here, with what resources and into what modes, in what social contexts?" "How is meaning being (re)made, and whose interest and agency is at work in the (re)making of meaning?" (adapted from Kress, 2010:57).

To address these questions, the notion of signs can shed some light. Echoing Ideama's (2003) proposal for a dynamic view of semiosis (see 4.2.1), Wang (2013) suggests that *signs* are better understood as

> social messages encoded in a specifically *designed* semiotic shape that provides optimal affordances and potentials in correspondence with the meaning they are intended to convey, and their meaning is (at least partly) reflected in the design of their form (p.7, originally emphasized).

Design, according to Kress (2010), is

> an assertion of the individual's interest in participating appropriately in the social and communicational world; and an insistence on their capacity to shape their interests through the *design* of messages with the resources available to them in specific situations (p.23, originally emphasized).

Notably, design also rests on a possible access to choice, which is always circumscribed by various powers (ibid., p.28; see also Hays, 1994). Viewed in this light, the notion of design denotes social actors' agency, involving their active participation in shaping the multi-semiotic social world and their accordance with its social system.

As such, *semiotic design* can be seen as a strategic social practice (e.g. Hodge & Kress 1988; Kress, 2010). It deals with social reality through creative rearrangement and transformation of resources in semiosis, thus allowing space for individuals to symbolically rework their identities (Wang, 2013). In other words, it embodies "the social unfolding of the processes and logics of representing" (ibid., p.50). In this sense, the notion of semiotic design echoes Ideama's (2001, 2003) *resemiotization*, through which existing semiotic resources or signs are transformed/translated and thus obtain new meanings. It occurs with the shift of cultural contexts and is always involved in social changes (see 4.2.1). In sum, both terms indicate that semiotic designers or meaning-and-sense (re)makers are not only "users of norms or systems of stable practices, but [...] constant transformers of these" (Kress 2002:19, in Wang, 2013:9). That said, transformation or resemiotization occurs only when the design or (re)making of semiotic resources and signs are in accord with the given sociocultural and sociopolitical context.

To illustrate, Wang (2013) adopts the notion of semiotic design to analyze semiotizing practices and trans-modal semiotic ensembles as ways to reconstruct authenticity. The ethnographic study with two sub-cases was conducted in an ethnic minority prefecture in China. In the case of the Internet hip-hop subculture, the participant rapper produced a heteroglossic voice by choosing multimodal semiotic resources and attending to the expectations of authenticity across multiple scales. This finding is based on Wang's interpretation of the local rapper's language use (verbal and oral, involving *Putonghua*, *fangyan*/dialect, and English) and his social positioning strategy to cater for the local, national and global audiences. Moreover, through these semiotic designing practices at the microlevel, an "inauthentic authenticity" is articulated. That is, new meanings are attached to authenticity and new ways of expressing it are specifically designed to fit into the new contexts.

In the case of the semiotic design of ethnic clothing in ethnic heritage tourism, authenticity centers on the semiotic representation of ethnicity, which connects with the construction and recognition of the local ethnic identity. Wang (2013) argues that the manoeuvre of identification through semiotic design in the ethnic prefecture is a concerted effort made by the local people and led by the local government. This endeavour is made in exchange for economic development and political purchase on the one hand; and it is also conditioned by the state multiculturalism and the global economy such as heritage tourism on the other hand.

In sum, according to Wang (2013), this ethnographic study is a response to the shifted focus on semiotics as practice, particularly the semiotic processes of authenticity design. Nevertheless, with its analysis of the multilingual rap lyrics as a manifestation of personal identity construction and the ethnic clothing as a material manifestation of ethnic group identity making, this study actually attends to the products of semiotic design, or "semiotic ensembles" in Wang's words, instead of the making or doing per se. In other words, it pays insufficient attention to the situated dynamics of semiotic practices. In addition, despite the use of semiotic design as an analytical tool, the semiotic analysis adopted is logocentric (e.g. the analysis of the multilingual lyrics). Even in the case of ethnic minority costume design, the focus is on the sociohistorical and political-economic factors intertwined in the design process, rather than the specific semiotic resources mobilized and (re)made for and in the design — the manifestation of agency.

Aware of the sparse attention paid to the multi-semiotic nature of representational and interactional resources and the full exercise of both agency and social power in multi-semiotic encounters in Wang's study, in this research I adopt ethnographic inquiry to explore individuals' multi-semiotic practices in a multilingual and multicultural region in China. Specifically, I attempt to examine the role of social forces including politics, economy, history, and ideology in shaping semiotic resources and practices, and to interpret individuals' agentive efforts to make meaning and sense through mobilizing available semiotic resources and signs. To these ends, I have investigated the emergent semiotic assemblages and relevant sociopolitical discourses circulated in that social context. Moreover, by observing the individuals' practices for and in a certain semiotic (re)assemblage and by interviewing them in an ethnographic manner, I try to explore *what* semiotic resources and signs are available, and *how* and *why* they are recognized, mobilized, and valued differently in that context. Katz (2001) espouses that ethnography is *revealing*, when researchers methodologically link "how social life takes the shapes that it does" to "the explanatory challenge of making a convincing argument about why social life works as it does" (p.447, originally emphasized). That means, the ethnographic inquiry into individuals' semiosis involving multi-semiotic resources and the semiotic assemblages emerging from these practices in a given context "links the micro to the macro, the small to the large, the varied to the routine, the individual to the social, the creative to the constraining, and the historical to the present and to the future" (Copland & Creese, 2015:26). The following section elucidates how a sociosemiotic-ethnographic perspective can help to explore ethnicity, including an explanation of constructionist ethnography (4.3.1) and the potential merger between social semiotics and ethnography (4.3.2).

4.2.3 Summary

This section buttresses the imperative to rethink meaning- and sensemaking from a sociosemiotic perspective, and it also calls for attention to the dynamics between agency and social structure. This shift recognises that semiosis is multi-semiotic and emerges from the complex interplay between social forces and actors at multiple levels. Aligning with this line of argumentation, to make sense of various semiotic resources and signs mobilised to represent ethnic culture and identity and meanwhile

to examine the social forces and actors entangled in the ethnicity (re)construction, a framework combining social semiotics and ethnography is adopted (see 4.3).

4.3 A sociosemiotic-ethnographic perspective of the social construction of ethnicity

Through a social constructionist lens, the (re)construction of ethnicity is an ongoing and entangled process involving multiscale social practices and power relations (see 2.2). In this entanglement, *culture*, *identity*, *agency*, and *structure* are fundamentals (e.g. Fenton, 2010; Nagel, 1993). Sociosemiotic theories, as elaborated in Section 4.2, attend to these elements. That said, to interpret the increasingly complicated (re)construction of ethnicity in the Chinese context (see 2.3 and Chapter 3) — "the social goings-on" (Kress, 2011:252), an ethnographic approach is an essential complement to this sociosemiotic study. According to Vannini (2007), the combination of social semiotics and ethnography serves to capture and analyse *lived experiences of meaning* — any representation of how people create, experience, use, interpret, and interact with meanings of semiotic resources and signs (see also Dicks et al., 2011; Kress, 2011). That means, it attends to the (re)making and actual use of semiotic resources and signs in everyday life, which is constrained and/or afforded by the social context where they take place. In this sense, this merged approach allows me to record and interpret individuals' multi-semiotic practices in relation to ethnicity in their everyday life as well as exploring and examining the specific social contexts in which ethnicity is (re)constructed.

Despite the merits of the merger, Crotty (1998) reminds researchers that social semiotics (a theoretical perspective), ethnography (a methodology), and constructionism (an epistemology) "need to be *related* to one another rather than merely set side by side as comparable, perhaps even competing, approaches or perspectives" (p.3, originally emphasized). To address this concern, this section clarifies ethnographic inquiry underpinned by social constructionism (4.3.1) and elucidates the compatibility of constructionist ethnography and social semiotics (4.3.2). This framework is then contextualized in the sociopolitical environment of Yunnan in which ethnicity is constantly (re)constructed (4.4).

4.3.1 Ethnography within social constructionist paradigm

Social scientists who consider themselves ethnographers, theorists, critics, or practitioners, share two fundamental characteristics: "The chief product of their work is language, and the processes through which they work involve interactive communication. *Thus the work of social scientists is inherently social and constructionist*" (Foster & Bochner, 2008:85, emphasized by me). In this sense, ethnographic inquiry adopted by scholars who commit to investigating the (re)creation of social realities through social practices or "reality-constituting practices" (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008a, 2008b), in which both their and the participants' roles are recognized, is grounded in social constructionism. That means, ethnography is polyvocal and intersubjective in nature, and it recognizes social contexts in which individuals' voice is shaped with certain agency exercised. *Voice*, as Hymes (1996) elucidated, is individuals' capacity to make themselves understood in their own terms, which visualizes the particular ways that they produce meaning.

Ethnography, in a broad sense, refers to "the recording and analysis of a culture or society, usually based on participant-observation and resulting in a written account of a people, place or institution" (Simpson & Coleman, 2017: n.p.). It is premised on, especially in terms of fieldwork, its commitment to understanding everyday life in a particular social world through sustainably engaging with that world (Atkinson et al., 2008:31). With this commitment, it aims to answer two basic questions: "how is social order constituted (created, managed, reproduced)?" and "how do individuals make sense of their way of living?" (Duranti,1997:90). To these ends, ethnography studies

> people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally (Brewer, 2000:10).

That means, ethnographers recognize that "social events are contextualized, connected with other events, meaningful in a more-than-unique way, and functional to those who perform the practices that construct the event" (Blommaert, 2007:684). This recognition

aligns with the social constructionist understanding of social world and knowledge as being constructed through multiscale social interactions and shared meanings within a specific sociocultural context (e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 2008a, 2008b; Vanni, 2007; Williamson, 2006). In this sense, social constructionism can direct ethnographic inquiry towards "the production of social forms and structure" (i.e. the *hows*) (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008a:381) and the discursive resources (i.e. the *whats*), from which social realities are produced. *Constructionist ethnography* thus is a research approach which integrates a constructionist view of social reality as actively constructed through everyday interactions, meaning-making practices, and discourses, with ethnographic inquiry to collect contextualized and detailed information which reveals the nuances of social construction (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008a, 2008b; Howell, 2013). In brief, this approach attends to how social life is produced, perceived, and organized through everyday practices and social interactions within a specific sociocultural context.

Notably, constructionist ethnography is different from naturalist ethnography, the latter of which focuses on "*what* is going on with and within social reality" while the former furthers the inquiry by asking *how* social realities are created, assembled, maintained, or reproduced (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008a:374-375, originally emphasized). In other words, naturalist ethnographers commit to capturing and understanding social actions and their attached meanings in a particular social setting (Howell, 2013:117). Comparatively, constructionist ethnography shifts its attention to how social actors create meaning and social order in their everyday worlds, which reveals the social processes of (re)constructing meaning and social order that they engage with to make their practices and experiences accountable (Holstein & Gubrium, 2008a). For this reason, constructionist ethnographers adopt a critical stance and commit to examining how power, ideology, economy, and culture shape and meanwhile are constrained by social constructions; and how social actors engage in or are marginalized by this process. Despite the difference, constructionist ethnographers also appreciate the naturalist agenda regarding *what* concerns and integrate them with their *hows*. That is, *how* are these *whats* sustained or reconstructed as realities of everyday life (ibid.)? To address this question, constructionist ethnographers also attend to everyday resources, meaning-making practices and reality-constituting processes involving social actors to make their experiences accountable within the social world in which they engage.

In sum, constructionist ethnography can provide valuable, meaningful data for social sciences and humanities like ethnic studies, which reveals how participants experience and construct their realities within specific sociocultural contexts. In the context of this research, it enables me to capture individuals' dynamic use and perceptions of semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers in their everyday life, and meanwhile to explore the social contexts where multi-semiotic practices and encounters occur. How exactly constructionist ethnographic inquiry sharpens the sociosemiotic lens to explore the (re)construction processes of ethnicity in China is elaborated in the following section.

4.3.2 Merger between social semiotics and ethnography

Ethnography as a methodological approach emerged from interest in the origins of culture and civilisation, which recorded and analysed social groups within their everyday worlds in an anthropological fashion (Howell, 2013). It presupposes that culture, as socially constructed systems of meaning or the webs of significance (i.e. meaning making) that people themselves have spun (Geertz,1973), is constantly (re)made in the interactions between individuals inside and outside of a cultural group, between individuals and the social contexts in which they engage (Hays,1994; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). In brief, culture is essentially social and semiotic (Geertz, 1973:5). In this sense, ethnographic inquiry and analysis of culture is an interpretive science in search of meaning — sorting out the structures of signification and tracing their social ground and import (ibid., pp.5-9). Social semiotics interprets and approaches culture in the same vein (see 4.1 and 4.2). It sees the (re)construction of culture as a process with its primary locale in semiosis across time and it also regards individual and collective identity of a formed community as permeated markers of culture. That means, social semioticians recognize culture as both a product situated at a specific spatial-temporal context and a dynamic and transforming process across time and space (e.g. Kress, 2011; Vannini, 2004, 2007). In sum, viewed in this light, ethnography and social semiotics are epistemologically compatible.

Moreover, social semiotics is an interdisciplinary inquiry, which always applies semiotic concepts and methods to specific research questions and varies according to research

contexts (van Leeuwen, 2005). Although aligning with this argument, Kress (2011) points out that social semiotics and ethnography ask and answer quite different research questions. For this reason, the complementarity of the two both is contingent on and serves specific research questions and problems, and it may result in *mergers* if the tasks persist (ibid., p.241, originally emphasized). Put differently, the two fields are brought together because, for specific research objectives concerning social processes of semiosis in an increasingly interconnected world, data needs complementing, which one theory alone cannot produce (ibid.). That means, this attempt is not made for data triangulation but to assemble theoretical and methodological approaches for specific research tasks in a fast-changing world. For this reason, sociosemiotic ethnography only "offers ideas for formulating questions and ways of searching for answers" instead of offering answers itself (van Leeuwen, 2005:1).

Despite the potential merger, questions are raised concerning whether and, if so, how ethnography and social semiotics can be partnered for mutual advantage (e.g. Deltsou & Tsibiridou, 2016; Dicks, et al., 2011; Flewitt, 2011; Kress, 2011; Vannini, 2007). Specifically, the central concern of social semiotics is meaning (re)making/semiosis with various cultural resources that are produced in social environments; while ethnography gives systematic attention to the complexity of social action in everyday life (Dicks, et al., 2011; Kress, 2011). In Atkinson et al.'s (2008) words, the starting point of ethnography is social action and social order which are displayed in the multilevel social life embodied in discourse and narrative, space, place, and time (p.32); while for social semiotics, it is *meaning* that is made and remade by meaning-makers in accordance with the social environments in which they engage (Dicks, et al., 2011; Kress, 2010, 2011). That said, ethnographers also recognize that "local social organization and the conduct of everyday life are complex, in that they are enacted through multiple modes of social action and representation" (Atkinson et al., 2008:31-32). That means, both ethnography and social semiotics concern with the diverse cultural resources that people make and use in their everyday life, and both do so from a perspective that prioritizes socio-contextual explanations (Dicks, et al., 2011). In this sense, both the multi-semiotic and context-specific nature of and the structure-agency dynamics in social practices are recognized in these two fields.

Navigated by this recognition, the two fields are methodologically complementary. As for social semiotics, Kress (2011) concedes that sociosemiotic approach to semiosis

calls and relies on *the social*, but it does not provide detailed articulations (p.241, originally emphasized). The social for social semiotics concerns with "how sign-makers participate in and shape the social and semiotic world through prospective 'design thinking' and 'production thinking' in fusing form and meaning" (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001, in Wang, 2013:7). Put succinctly, the social is *meaning generative* — the source of semiotic processes and forms (Kress, 2010, emphasized by me). However, research tools, such as participant observation and interviews, which are used to examine real-life experience and actual social practices involving plural subjective voices and perspectives (Ness & Coleman, 2023), are not methods of social semiotics (Kress, 2011). Rather, they are common tools of ethnography. That means, an ethnographic approach can complement social semiotics methodologically by providing the latter with a social map to explore much wider and deeper connections between individuals and the social contexts in which they engage.

In terms of ethnography, despite its merit in capturing the complexity of everyday life, it often lacks sufficient systematization in its explorations of the different orders of action and meaning and its analysis of material, spatial, and sensory resources (Atkinson et al., 2008). As a result, it tends to treat these resources as background contexts or detail for description (Dicks et al., 2011). Social semiotics, with its powerful analytic approaches (e.g. indexicality, iconicity, symbolicity, semiotic (re)assemblages) (e.g. Jappy, 2016; Ness & Coleman, 2023; see 4.2), can provide ethnography a systematic analysis of various semiotic resources and ideologies (Keane, 2003, 2005, 2018; Vannini, 2004, 2007). In sum, the methodological complementarity allows sociosemiotic ethnographers to focus on how social actors design, use, consume, and interpret semiotic resources and signs in specific social contexts with which their practices and perceptions accord. What exactly the methodological lens compounded of social semiotics and constructionist ethnography looks like is explained in Chapter 5.

4.3.3 Summary

This section sets out an ethnographic inquiry within the tenet of social constructionism, which underpins the potential combination of social semiotics and ethnography. This compounded lens focuses not only on multi-semiotic resources and practices

contributing to the constant construction of ethnic culture and identity but also on the dynamics between social structures and individual agency entangled in the ethnic (re)construction. To tailor this framework to study ethnicity in China, the sociocultural, political-economic, and historical contexts of Yunnan Province, with the Dai community in Xishuangbanna as an example, is illuminated in 4.4. With sociosemiotic ethnography as both theoretical and methodological framework to explore ethnicity in the Chinese context, this research can address the questions raised in 4.6.

4.4 Contextualizing the sociosemiotic-ethnographic framework

Social and cultural contexts are emphasized as a central component of sociosemiotic analysis of ethnicity (e.g. Buccellati, 2010). Buccellati (2010) argues that signs or semiotic resources as ciphers and markers of ethnicity must be contextualized and interpreted in relation to each other within the social environment where they signify and denote the values behind them. Similarly, aware of the role of context in multi-semiotic interactions, Hawkins (2018), among others, asserts that context is fully intertwined with and engrained in semiotic assemblages and semiosis. For this reason, social semiotics attends to contexts at different levels, including the context of a semiotic assemblage itself and the context within which semiosis takes place or semiotic resources assemble. That means, from a social semiotic perspective, *context* comprises semiotic assemblages per se, the local and trans-local places and spaces, conditions of multi-semiotic interactions and meaning-making, and the histories of semiotic resources and their engagements with social processes within which the resources are attached with meaning (Hawkins, 2018:62-63). To explore the multilevel contexts, social semioticians need an ethnographic lens (see 4.3.2).

Ethnographers set out to record and interpret how people live their everyday lives, so their studies are carried out in *natural* settings — the social worlds in which the people being studied live (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Taylor, 2002). That means, for ethnographers, *context* refers to social, historical, political, cultural, environmental, and economic elements that influence the practices and beliefs of individuals and groups and meanwhile connect individuals, communities, institutions, and locations (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010:22). In this sense, ethnographic

research is context-sensitive and locally specific (e.g. Krzyżanowski, 2011; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). It thus opens a window for social semioticians to approach both semiotic (re)assemblages per se (a microlevel context) and how they (re)configurate under particular extra-semiotic conditions (a meso-/macrolevel context) within which semiosis occurs.

To tailor the sociosemiotic ethnography underpinned by social constructionism (see 4.3) to the Chinese context of ethnicity (re)construction, the following sections set out the prominent features of the macro and meso-level contexts — Yunnan Province (4.4.1) and Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture (4.4.2) — within which semiotic assemblages involving ethnic cultural markers are (re)created and (re)configurated. The microlevel context or semiotic assemblages (Hawkins, 2018) — the Dai culture-themed restaurant is illustrated in Chapter 6, to set the stage for analysing multi-semiotic resources and practices involving in the making of the restaurant.

4.4.1 Yunnan Province

Yunnan province, one of the 23 provinces in China, is located in the far southwest of China, bordering Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region and Guizhou Province to the east, Sichuan Province to the north and Tibet Autonomous Region to the northwest, sharing borders with Myanmar, Laos, and Vietnam, and accessible to Thailand and Cambodia by waterways (Li, et al., 2022; Guo, 2013). *Yunnan* 云南 in Chinese literally means “South of the Clouds”, so named because it is situated on the south-facing mountain slopes and the clouds covering the mountains separate Yunnan from Sichuan to the north (Turner,2005; Xu et al.,1994). Moreover, Yunnan is under the influence of Pacific and Indian oceans, thus blessed with mild climate, rich water resources (e.g. the Upper Yangtze River, the Lancang-Mekong River, Nu Jiang/Salween), and spectacular scenery with the largest biodiversity and landscape diversity in China (Guo, 2013; Miller, 1994; Turner, 2005). For this reason, Yunnan is also known as *Colourful Yunnan* (*qicai Yunnan* 七彩云南).

The geographic diversity of Yunnan features permanently snow-covered mountains, limestone, marble and karst mountains, volcanoes, tropical jungles, and some deepest gorges in the world (Mansfield & Walters, 2007). The diverse landscapes are inhabited

by more than half of the animal and plant species in China. That is why Yunnan is labelled with *animal kingdom*, *plant kingdom*, *world garden*, and *species gene bank*. Given the diverse natural landscapes and biodiversity, the pillar industries in Yunnan include agriculture, tobacco, mining, hydroelectric power, and tourism (Guo, 2013). That said, despite its natural beauty and abundant resources, due to its location in a mountainous area (94% of Yunnan comprised of high plateaus and mountains) with an average altitude of 2000 meters, transportation issues largely hinder the regional development (Chow, 2005; Guo, 2013; Mansfield & Walters, 2007). Notably, the geographic disadvantage of Yunnan is currently valorized as locational and historical advantages owing to its bordering southeast and south Asia (Summers, 2021) and as an exploitable material and symbolic resource in the form of biodiversity (Klein, 2013; Oakes, 1993).

Albeit its remote geographic location, Yunnan has never been isolated from the outside world. As early as in the Tang Dynasty (618-907), *chama gudao* 茶马古道 (the Ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Road), also known as Southern Silk Road of China, was built, which extended from Yunnan, Sichuan, Tibet, to India (Yang, n.d.)[24]. It had played a significant role in the cultural and economic exchange between China and India before being destroyed during the World War II. During the 8th century, a unified state in Yunnan — Nanzhao (南诏) was established, mainly populated by the Yi and the Bai people. This kingdom expanded into parts of Burma and Vietnam (Mansfield & Walters, 2007). Then Nanzhao's successor — the kingdom of Dali (大理) — remained in power until 1253, when Kublai Khan conquered this region and left Mongol troops and Muslims from Persia and central Asia to be stationed (Mansfield & Walters, 2007; Turner, 2005). As a result, the ethnic communities in Yunnan have become more diverse.

Later in the 19th century, upon the construction of the Indo-China Railway to Kunming, the capital city of Yunnan, more Christian communities were established in the ethnic minority areas by European and American missionaries (Mansfield & Walters, 2007; Turner, 2005). More recently, Yunnan's trade relationship with the neighbouring Asian countries has been strengthened due to the improvement of transportation in the

Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS)[6] and the implement of the Belt and Road Initiative in late 2013 (Guo, 2013; Summers, 2021). Yunnan is thus regarded as China's key land bridge to Southeast Asia and major actor in developing the GMS Economic Corridor (Tubilewicz, 2017). The increasing economic interactions of Yunnan with South and Southeast Asia and beyond have materialized as infrastructure development, increased trade and investment, tourism promotion, and other cross-border ties (e.g. cultural exchanges, partnerships between universities in the subregion) (Summers, 2021; Tubilewicz, 2017). Note that Yunnan's efforts to build relations, trade and others, with bordering countries are fundamentally "an inward-looking political exercise" (Tubilewicz, 2017:933). That means, these manoeuvres are designed by Yunnan authorities to facilitate Yunnan's economic development and differentiate Yunnan from other underdeveloped provinces in western China. This critically enables Yunnan to win over the central government and hence lay claim to domestic political and economic resources (see 7.2 for details).

Except its geo-ecological, geohistorical, geo-economic, and geopolitical uniqueness, Yunnan is also renowned for its ethnic diversity and has become one of the most prominent ethno-tourism locales in China. Specifically, it is home to 25 out of 55 officially identified ethnic minority groups in China (Zhang & Tsung, 2019), including Achang, Bai, Blang, Buyi, Dai, De'ang, Dulong, Hani, Hui, Jingpo, Jinuo, Lahu, Lisu, Man, Miao, Mongolian, Naxi, Nu, Pumi, Shui, Tibetan, Wa, Yi, Yao, and Zhuang. In addition, there are still other ethnic groups waiting to be identified, such as Kucong, Kemu, and Limi peoples (Miller, 1994; Yang, 2009). Among those twenty-five minority groups, fifteen are unique to Yunnan and ten groups maintain close ties with their kin in the other Mekong riparian countries (Tubilewicz, 2017), such as the Dai in Yunnan and their counterparts Thai/Tai — historically, religiously, culturally, and linguistically related — in Thailand, Myanmar, and Laos (Cable, 2008). The identified ethnic minorities altogether account for 33.12% of the province's population (around 15.636 million people), with 26 minority languages and 22 scripts being used (Yang & Zhao, 2021; Wang

[6] The upper reaches of the trans-boundary Mekong River in East Asia and Southeast Asia — *Lancang* River (瀾沧江), runs through Yunnan to the South-eastern Asia. The Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) includes Yunnan, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam. In 1992, a GMS Economic Cooperation Program was carried out by the Asian Development Bank, which aimed to facilitate cross-border trade and investment, and enhance the connectivity and competitiveness of regional economies as well as a sense of community (Tubilewicz, 2017).

et al., 2022). That is why Yunnan is seen as “a multilingual and multicultural mirror of minority nationalities [ethnic minorities] in China” (Yuan et al., 2015:176, in Li, et al. 2022:124).

The ethno-ecological diversity coupled with its unique geographic location has won Yunnan opportunities to diversify and develop its economy since the 1990s. For example, in the 90s, the market-oriented reforms in China and its increasing engagement with international markets gave rise to competition among Chinese provinces to attract foreign and domestic investors and tourists (Klein, 2013; Oakes, 2000). Against this backdrop and backed by the central government’s efforts to open up the west (*Xibu Dakaifa* 西部大开发) since 2000, the Yunnan provincial government has promoted Yunnan as a Great Cultural Province and a Green Economy Province to foreground its cultural and biological diversity (Xu & Salas, 2003; Xu et al., 2005). These political agendas have created a space for Yunnan to capitalize on its diverse ethnic cultures, well-preserved ecological environment, and ethnic minorities’ traditional practices and knowledges pertain to sustainable use of natural resources (Klein, 2013; Xu et al., 2005). This created space foregrounds tourism — a pillar of development in Yunnan (Swain, 2014), which features multi-ethnic cultures and ecological diversity[25].

Notably, the political-economic practices for provincial economic development and cultural promotion have been essential to construct and brand regional identity in China (Oakes, 2000). For this research, the regional identity (re)construction and branding are one of the prominent entry points to unveil the interplay between microlevel actors’ practices and perceptions and the state’s and the provincial government’s exercise in the political-economic systems. Before delving into the micro-meso-macro interplay, it is also necessary to explore the meso-level context — Xishuangbanna, from which the Dai culture relocated and resemiotized at the restaurant in question is transported. The connection between the Dai culture-themed restaurant and Xishuangbanna is made clear on the restaurant promotion leaflets. On the leaflets, the restaurant name is attached with a subtitle: “the Dai cuisine in Banna” (版纳傣味 *Banna Daiwei*).

4.4.2 Xishuangbanna: a taste of the Dai culture

Xishuangbanna Dai Autonomous Prefecture (also Banna) is one of the eight autonomous prefectures in Yunnan that were established in the 1950s. It is located in the southwest of Yunnan and the southernmost tip of China, bordering Pu'er city (see 6.2.2.3) to the northeast and northwest, Laos to the southeast, and Myanmar to the southwest (see Image 4.1) (Nomoto & Yokoyama, 2020; Pei,1985). The population of the 12 ethnic minority groups, including Dai, Hani, Lahu, Yi, Blang, Jinuo, Yao, Miao, Hui, Wa, Zhuang, and Jingpo, accounts for 77.78% (794,200) of the total population (Yunnan Yearbook 2023[26]; Zhang et al., 2023). Many of these minority groups have kin on the other sides of the borders, such as the Yao as the Mien and the Miao as the Hmong in Laos, and the Jingpo as the Kachin in Myanmar (Cable, 2008; Mansfield & Walters, 2007; Qi & Jin, 2023).

Geographically, 94% of Xishuangbanna's terrain is mountainous and hilly coupled with the rest being river valleys. The Lancang-Mekong River and its tributaries run from north to south and bisect Xishuangbanna, and Xishuangbanna is also blessed with two major monsoons throughout the year (Henin & Flaherty, 1994; Pei, 1985, 1988; Xu, et al., 2004). Unsurprisingly, Xishuangbanna is home to the largest tropical rainforest and has the most well-preserved tropical ecosystem in China, thus metaphorized as *Kingdom of Plants*, *Kingdom of Animals*, *Emerald on the Tropic of Cancer*, *Museum of Forest Ecology*, among others (Yunnan Yearbook, 2023). In brief, Xishuangbanna is an exemplar site of the intersections of biodiversity and cultural diversity and is among the earliest developed and most widely known ethno-tourist attractions in China (Cable, 2008; Yang & Wall, 2009b).

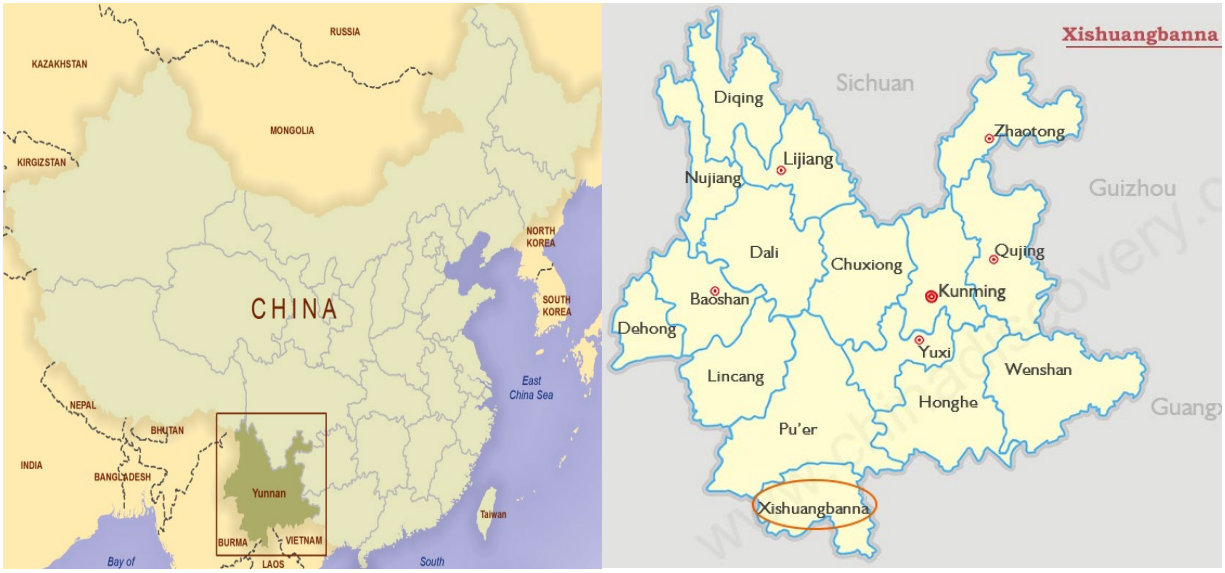

Image 4.1 Map of Yunnan Province with a highlight of Xishuangbanna[7]

As the largest ethnic group in Xishuangbanna, the Dai people, accounting for almost one-third of the total population, have largely shaped the landscape of Xishuangbanna through their land management practices, such as farming wet rice paddies, swidden agriculture and various types of agroforestry, fuelwood cultivation, and collecting non-timber forest products (e.g. Henin & Flaherty, 1994; Pei, 1985, 1988; Zeng, 2023). Note that such practices are also common among other ethnic minority groups in southwest China, though most of these groups are linguistically and culturally distinct (Henin & Flaherty, 1994; Pei, 1988; Xu et al., 2004; Xu et al., 2005). In terms of the Dai group, their agricultural and forestry practices are underpinned by their forest- and water-oriented philosophy and religious beliefs (e.g. Theravada Buddhism and Polytheism), which have ingrained a respect for forest, watersheds, plants, and animals (Liu et al., 2002; Pei, 1985; Xu et al., 2005).

Regarding their culinary traditions, the Dai people grow glutinous rice as their staple food. It is also an indispensable offering in the Dai rituals and an important carrier of their food culture and customs (Qin & Jin, 2023). In addition, they mainly collected wild edible plants to meet their vegetable needs in the past, but now most of vegetables are grown in their home gardens with wild plants as supplements (Xu, et al., 2004; Zhang, et al., 2023). Wild food plants are commonly used as a vegetable, seasoning, food dye, snack, and side dish. According to Zhang et al. (2023), the practice of wild plant

[7] The left map is from Qu's (2013) paper and the right map is available at https://www.chinadiscovery.com/yunnan/xishuangbanna/map.html

consumption is “always on the edge of the culture and food system, existing in the rural and indigenous foodscape in China” (p.55). Despite its symbolic uniqueness, the wild plant eating culture of the Dai people has changed over the past few decades. Especially in the urban areas, usually packed with tourists, the local government and relevant institutions carry out strict regulations to ensure food safety, due to ecological degradation caused by overexploitation and pollution (Henin & Flaherty, 1994; Zeng, 2019; Zeng & Reuse, 2016). Under the food safety regulations, the local restaurants use fewer various wild edible plants or cook them in the non-traditional ways to cater for tourists, though in the rural areas, the wild plant consumption culture is still common within the Dai community, owing to the passing down of traditional knowledges about wild plant use.

The Dai culinary traditions to integrate wild edible plants feature both the Dai people’s appreciation of nature and their cultural uniqueness. These traditions have been promoted nation- and worldwide by the local and national governments and relevant institutions, especially as a selling point for ethno- and ecotourism in Xishuangbanna since 1980s (see Chen, 2014). As a result, through these intertwined multiscale efforts, the knowledges and traditional practices of ethnic minority groups are reframed as models for conservation and sustainability regarding both culture and nature. This may explain why, with the emphasized environmental and ecological management in contemporary China (e.g. Ecological Civilization project, see 7.3.2), the traditional knowledges and practices of natural resource use passed down within ethnic minority communities are revalorized.

The Dai culture themed restaurant in which I conducted my fieldwork is affiliated to the Dai community in Xishuangbanna. That means, the creation of the restaurant involves various semiotic resources and signs of the Dai group being *recontextualized* from Xishuangbanna to the urban area where the restaurant locates (see Iedema, 2003). The design and making of the restaurant as a semiotic assemblage, within which particular sub-semiotic assemblages emerge and/or are reconfigured through multi-semiotic practices is elaborated in Chapter 6.

4.4.3 Summary

This section has illustrated the geopolitical and socioeconomic changes of Yunnan Province through a historical review, with its focus on the cotemporary Yunnan which foregrounds and capitalizes on its ecological, ethnic, and cultural diversities. Then it shows the geographic and ethnic landscapes of Xishuangbanna which is populated by the largest Dai community in China. More importantly, it is the Dai community that the Dai culture themed restaurant affiliates to (see Chapter 6).

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has illustrated a theoretical framework compounded of social semiotics and constructionist ethnography to explore the (re)construction of ethnicity in China. It explains why a sociosemiotic approach serves well to explore ethnicity in the Chinese context, which is (re)constructed with multi-semiotic resources and practices and entangled with the interplay between multiscale forces and actors. To sharpen the sociosemiotic lens, an ethnographic inquiry framed within social constructionism is elaborated. Moreover, the potential combination of social semiotics and ethnography is buttressed by their shared concerns and epistemological and methodological compatibilities. With this compounded framework, I can investigate what semiotic resources and signs are available and mobilized at the Dai culture themed restaurant in Yunnan, China. Meanwhile, it enables me to explore how the semiotic resources serve and are resemiotized as iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs to (re)construct Dai cultural representations and create an *authentic* Dai restaurant. Moreover, I can examine what social forces are involved and how social mechanisms and individual agency intertwin and play out in this process. All of these are encapsulated in the research questions (see 4.6) that this research sets out to answer.

4.6 Research questions

Through reviewing the literature regarding ethnicity in the Chinese context (see 2.2.3, 2.3, and Chapter 3), the following gaps are identified: first, individual agency mainly

seen as being weighed down by the structures of power — a dichotomous view — in the (re)construction of ethnicity (see 3.2 and 3.3.1). In addition, few studies deal with the dynamic and interactive interplay of multiscale social forces and actors, especially mobilised by the emerging political-economic markets within and beyond China (see 3.2 and 3.3.1); second, the multi-semiotic nature of ethnic cultural markers being partially attended to (see 3.2, 3.3.1, and 4.2.2.2); third, critical ethnographic studies, especially from a sociosemiotic lens, of ethnicity in China being scarce (see 3.2, 3.3.1 and 4.2.2.2). Finally, there is room for further research exploring the expanding cultural and natural resources which represent the ethnic minority groups in China (see 3.3.2 and 3.3.3). Moreover, there is a lacuna in the research relating ethnicity (re)construction in China to the (re)making and use of cultural and natural resources for representation, especially from a sociosemiotic perspective (see 3.3.2, 3.3.3, and 4.2).

Informed by the reviewed literature, this research, through adopting social semiotics (see 4.2) with a constructionist ethnographic lens (see 4.3), addresses the following problems: what semiotic resources and signs are available and how they are (re)constructed as representations of ethnicity in Yunnan, China; meanwhile, how individuals' agency and social forces are mobilised by political-economic factors and intertwined in the (re)construction process; and what purposes do the (re)construction of ethnicity and the (re)making of the relevant cultural markers serve. These problems are translated as the following research questions:

> **RQ 1** What semiotic resources and signs are available and (re)semiotized to represent ethnic minorities in the multi-ethnic region in Yunnan Province, China, and particularly how are they mobilized and assembled at the Dai culture themed restaurant?

This question seeks to capture the existing and accessible semiotic resources and signs representing the ethnic minority groups in Yunnan, with a focus on the Dai people.

> **RQ 2** How do individuals interpret, use, (re)semiotize, (re)locate, and (re)assemble available semiotic resources and signs for the design and authentication of an ethnic themed restaurant?

This question seeks to explore the resources which are enregistered and (re)semiotized as indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs of ethnicity, and then it delves into how these

signs are relocated, recreated, and reconfigured to design and authenticate the Dai culture themed restaurant.

> **RQ 3** How are ethnic minority cultures and identities constructed and reconstructed at the ethnic themed restaurant and in Yunnan, and how is the (re)construction process intertwined with the sociopolitical changes in China?

This question examines the (re)construction of ethnic cultural representations and the (re)formation of ethnic identities, as well as the role of individuals' agency and the impact of social changes in these (re)construction processes.

To address these questions, this research adopts a methodological approach with the compound lens of ethnography and social semiotics to explore the multi-semiotic nature of and the agency-structure dynamics entangled in ethnicity (re)construction in China. The compound lens enables me to unveil what semiotic resources and signs are created, designed, used, interpreted, and configurated by actual social actors, as well as how and to what ends. Chapter 5 outlines the methodological framework of this sociosemiotic ethnographic study.

Chapter 5 Methodology

5.1 Introduction

Ethnic minority related research in China has traditionally paid limited attention to individuals' agency or simply treated agency as being constrained by sociopolitical structure (see 3.2). For Wang and Gao (2023), the literature has mainly "conceptualised institutions and individuals as recipients of top-down policies", while it has given less weight to unpacking individuals' agency per se (p.13). That means, approaching ethnicity in the Chinese context necessitates the use of a methodology which has the ambition to interpret individuals' active engagement in multi-semiotic encounters as forms of agency and unpack the generative power of structure in these encounters. In the context of this thesis, sociosemiotic ethnography as the main exploratory method studies semiosis which (intentionally or unintentionally) include or exclude ethnic semiotic resources and signs as agentive practices. Moreover, it traces the impact of the mechanisms of sociohistorical, cultural, economic, and political structuration on these microlevel resources and practices, and meanwhile interprets individuals' mediating efforts.

This chapter sets out my methodology, introduces the participants, and elucidates the ethical concerns of my research. Specifically, it argues sociosemiotic ethnography as the best fit for the study of ethnicity in China (5.2). In addition, it explains why this ethnographic research is conducted remotely (5.2.3). It then elucidates the methods of collecting data (5.3), the raw research materials and initial coding processes (5.4.1), coupled with the emerged thematic categories (5.4.1.4), and also discusses the methods of analysis (5.4.2). This chapter concludes with a reflection on the limitations of the methodology (5.5) and a summary of the key points of this chapter (5.6).

5.2 Sociosemiotic ethnography through remote methods

To buttress my argument that sociosemiotic ethnography suits the purpose of this research, this section starts with an elaboration of sociosemiotic ethnography, including its defining features. Then I compare it with other language related

ethnographic approaches — linguistic ethnography and linguistic anthropology. Following this, I explain why this sociosemiotic ethnography is conducted from afar.

5.2.1 Sociosemiotic ethnography as a methodological approach

Vannini (2007) specifies the combination of sociosemiotic theories and ethnographic inquiry as *sociosemiotic ethnography*. It is concerned with the actual use of semiotic resources and signs in social contexts and strives to capture and record lived experiences of meaning by examining the semiotic and extra-semiotic constraints and potentials of everyday life (pp.121-122; see also Dicks, et al., 2011; Kress, 2011). In other words, it is a form of constructionist, interpretive, critical, analytical, and reflexive ethnography, which combines fieldwork and theory to systematically understand and examine how social actors use semiotic resources in their everyday life and to what end (Vannini, 2007). In brief, it is underpinned by constructionism, interpretivism, and reflexivity, and features critical-analytic capacity.

The constructionist aspect of sociosemiotic ethnography is recognized in the ethnographic enterprise lately (see 4.3.1). According to Holstein and Gubrium (2008a, 2008b), constructionist sensibilities for both ethnographic fieldwork and analysis draw ethnographers' attention to the parts of social life that unveil how and for what purpose social reality and relevant social orders are formulated and organized. For sociosemiotic ethnography, it is "about the ideological worlds that people make through semiotic resources and about the contested meanings and subjectivities that semiotic resources shape" (Vannini, 2007:126). For this reason, the methodological scope of sociosemiotic ethnography involves discourses and texts, lived experiences, and sociohistorical, geopolitical, and economic circumstances (ibid., p.122), involving both *what* and *how* concerns (see 4.3.1). For this research, that is: What semiotic resources and signs are used, what is being constructed using them, and what conditions shape the practices and process? How semiotic resources and practices come to be regarded as ethnic representations, and how/why they are allowed to (re)construct ethnic culture and identity?

In terms of interpretivism, it shares the epistemological view with social constructionism — both concerned with the meanings and experiences involving

human beings, and therefore its central tenet is "that people are constantly involved in interpreting their everchanging world [...and] the social world is constructed by people" (Williamson, 2006:84; see also Crotty, 1998). In this sense, interpretations are open, dynamic, and embedded with researchers' values and perspectives, as well as those of being studied. To validate their interpretive insights, interpretive research favours "naturalistic inquiry" in which fieldwork usually takes place in a natural setting through ethnographic approaches (ibid.). That means, ethnography underpinned by the interpretivist philosophy is a process to construe the social constructions of the participants being studied. Moreover, it recognizes that social studies are part of the world that researchers explore and therefore requires them to reflect on how they co-construct data and shape analysis. That is, the role of ethnographers' interpretations and reflexivity is emphasized (Fabian, 1979, 1995; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010). A case in point is my reflection on my life and study journeys in Introduction, which has navigated this research and finally anchored it in a sociosemiotic ethnographic approach to ethnicity in the Chinese context.

Notably, the recognition of individuals' voices echoes Foucault's concerns with *the subjugated knowledges* of the people located at the margins of society (Hartman, 1992). These knowledges are

> what people know (and this is by no means the same thing as common knowledge or common sense but, on the contrary, a particular knowledge, a knowledge that is local, regional, or differential, incapable of unanimity and which derives its power solely from the fact that it is different from all knowledges that surround it), it is the reappearance of what people know at a local level, of these disqualified knowledges, that made the critique possible (Foucault, 2003:7-8).

That means, with the recognition of the polyvocal/intersubjective nature of knowledge production in ethnographic inquiry, ethnography — a thick and informed account of the everyday world — is a critical enterprise.

The critical capacity of sociosemiotic ethnography is further strengthened by the associations between critical discourse analysis (CDA) and ethnography and between CDA and social semiotics. The mutual complementarity of the three rests on the fundamental focuses of CDA on the relationships between semiosis and other social elements, between text/discourse and context, and its recent movements towards

context-oriented and agency-related analysis, especially the increasingly complex social, political, and economic contexts (Fairclough, 2001, 2013; Krzyżanowski, 2011; van Dijk, 1993, 2001, 2006, 2015; van Leeuwen, 2005). For example, the intricate relations between multiscale social contexts and social actors' practices as discourses have been explored in the socio-cognitive strand of CDA (e.g. van Dijk, 2001, 2006) and the multiscale definition of context furthered by discourse-historical strands of CDA (e.g. Fairclough, 2001, 2013; Krzyżanowski, 2011; van Dijk, 1993, 2015). As for sociosemiotic ethnography, the associations of social semiotics, ethnography, and CDA manifest as the capacity to critically analyse semiotic resources materialized as iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs and discourses and their relationship with multiscale contexts (see 5.4.2).

It is worth noting that recent years have seen different combinations between research on social practices involving language, ethnography, and CDA, such as linguistic anthropology and linguistic ethnography. Despite the shared commitment to comprehensively recording and critically analysing discourse in context among linguistic ethnography, linguistic anthropology, and sociosemiotic ethnography, there are distinctions among them. The following section explores the distinctions and more importantly explains why sociosemiotic ethnography best serves the purpose of this research.

5.2.2 Linguistic ethnography and linguistic anthropology

Since 2001, *linguistic ethnography* has gained currency among scholars who are committed to integrating ethnographic approaches into research on language in social life (e.g. Creese & Copland, 2015; Rampton, 2007, 2010; Rampton et al., 2004; Tusting, 2019)[27]. It is "an approach which combines theoretical and methodological approaches from linguistics and from ethnography to research social questions which in some way involve language" (Tusting, 2019:1). Put simply, it attends to questions about language, society, and the interconnection between them (Maybin & Tusting, 2011). In this sense, linguistic ethnography is closely related to linguistic anthropology, especially the one that is underpinned by post-structuralism and post-modernism. That is, "the study of language as a cultural resource and speaking as a cultural practice" which enter the

constitution of society and represent actual or possible worlds (Duranti,1997:2-3). That means, both linguistic ethnography and linguistic anthropology share an interest in how language plays a role in constructing meanings, narratives, identities, and ideologies, which links the microscale social interactions to the macroscale sociocultural contexts (Duranti,1997; Maybin & Tusting, 2011; Tusting, 2019). The interconnection is particularly obvious in ethnographic studies of multilingualism (Tusting, 2019), such as the practical theory of translanguaging in diverse contexts (e.g. Li, 2018a, 2018b; Pennycook, 2018b; TLANG, 2014-2018).

What is also notable is the distinction between them, though not clear-cut. Linguistic anthropology traditionally committed to making the strange familiar when studying "exotic" languages of a distant community (Bauman & Sherzer, 1975; Duranti, 1997); While linguistic ethnography draws on socio- and applied linguistics for its disciplinary framework to study sites and processes close-at-hand (Maybin & Tusting, 2011; Rampton, et al., 2004). That means, building on *from-inside-outwards* research trajectory (Rampton, 2007; Rampton, et al., 2004), it "focuses on 'making the familiar strange', uncovering the routine and every day and capturing the way things unfold in real time (Heller 2011)" (Shaw, et al., 2015:10). For this reason, linguistic ethnographers develop ethnography in the process of working from their familiar disciplines, such as language, discourse, communication, and literacy (Rampton, 2007). Comparatively, linguistic anthropologists study languages in their natural contexts, to "understand the social and cultural foundations of language itself, while exploring how social and cultural formations are grounded in linguistic practices" (Department of Anthropology at Indiana University, n.p.)[28].

Except their different research trajectories, when facing the criticism of lacking theory, the two fields also respond differently. Linguistic anthropology in the U.S. foregrounds the linguistic aspects and aims to generalize communicative practices by generating and elaborating theoretical concepts (Rampton, et al., 2004). Consequently, the social processes become less visible in this linguistic anthropologic work, or social structure is simply regarded as "an emergent product of interactions" (Duranti. 1997:10). As Collins (2003) criticises, "although the concepts discussed [in this field…] contribute to a viable social-cum-linguistic constructivism, they do not, in and of themselves, provide a clear image of what society is like: how it is organised, what its primary institutions are, or whether it is changing or static" (pp.36-37, in Rampton, et al., 2004:16).

This approach is underpinned by an assumption that macro-sociological structure need not be attended unless obviously discernible in language use (ibid.). That means, social contexts are largely treated as the background against which interactions take place.

Similarly, linguistic ethnographers have also developed general theoretical concepts about language practices, such as *intersectionality*, (*socio-temporal*) *scale*, *language commodification/consumption* in language-and-globalization research (e.g. Grey & Piller, 2019; Slembrouck & Vandenbroucke, 2019). Yet, linguistic ethnographers, initially most of whom are based in the U.K., start their research typically from their personal experience possibly involving frustrations with state policy or institutional discourses (Rampton, 2007). For this reason, they seek to answer the question, "what more general issues can the description & analysis of my experience help to clarify?" (Rampton, et al., 2004:15). To answer this question, linguistic ethnographers need to get analytic distance on what they are familiar with and expand their analytic scope beyond their institutional practice to include the sociopolitical mechanisms and processes at a larger scale.

Despite linguistic ethnographers' commitment to approaching social structure, Blommaert (2007) criticizes their attempt to separate *culture* from *language* as two different objects of ethnography and linguistics respectively (e.g. Rampton, 2007, 2010; Rampton et al., 2004). Echoing this, Mertz (2007) elucidates that culture and language can be only understood as separate because they are wrenched apart analytically. Yet, "having done this in an effort to gain some purchase on an overwhelming subject, we face the difficult task of putting them back together with *integrity*" (p.341, originally emphasized). Language use in real life are practices performed by people in social environments and the appropriateness of these performances involves a shared knowledge of both linguistic code and sociocultural norms and values (e.g. Gumperz, 1964; Hymes, 1964a, 1964b, 1984). That means, language is a cultural resource and act. Furthermore, closely related to the present research, Nagel (1994) contends that culture designates the language, beliefs, traditions, norms, and symbols that constitute a particular ethnic group, and it also dictates whether they are appropriate or inappropriate. In this sense, to understand human performances and practices, attention should be given to both linguistic and non-linguistic cultural resources (Blommaert, 2009). Actually, Hammersley (2007) points out that the new resources

offered to ethnography in linguistic ethnography are far from entirely linguistics, though their presence is mainly treated as backhanded compliment to linguistic ones.

A case in point is Zhu et al.'s (2017) linguistic ethnographic study in a Polish shop in London. It was conducted to understand how spatial layout, the display of objects and texts, positioning of the shop owners and customers, and their body movement, gaze and verbal interaction were assembled and mobilized in the making of a translanguaging space. Based on their analysis, they argue that such a space is created by and for individuals' *translanguaging practices* to deploy and orchestrate "multilingual, multimodal, multisensory, and multi-semiotic sense- and meaning-making resources" (p.429). In short, the incorporation of social space into translanguaging as both a product and a meaning-making resource buttresses the interconnectedness of various resources in a particular space, and it also emphasizes individuals' ability to mobilise and adjust the resources available to them.

Despite the recognition of agency involving multi-semiotic resources in this study, what is missing is the *social* nature of human practices and the making of space. Pennycook (2017b), who similarly studied a Bangladeshi-run store in Sydney through a translanguaging lens, calls to understand not only the sociohistorical and economic conditions of the cultivation of available objects in a space but also their place within a trade network and position within a local economy (p.275). Put another way, to arrive a better understanding of multi-semiotic resources and practices, it is necessary to interpret them not only within a real-time interactive context but also within the wider social context where the interactions occur. Furthermore, the mediating role of social space in physical, sociocultural, economic, and political processes should be dealt with. For this reason, the notion of semiotic (re)assemblage is better to analyze multi-semiotic practices and their relationship with multiscale contexts (see 4.2.1). For these reasons, I argue that sociosemiotic ethnography better serves the purpose of this research. Section 5.2.3 explains how this methodological approach works from afar.

5.2.3 Sociosemiotic ethnography from afar

Although sociosemiotic ethnography is theoretically feasible, in my case, the practical issues (e.g. international data transfer and data collection management in China) and

ethical considerations (e.g. my research concerning ethnic minorities) (see 1.2.2.1 and 5.3.3) have translated physical fieldwork, especially ethnographic participant observation, into potential risks regarding the participants and this research per se. Restricted by the conflict-ridden reality, I had to conduct my fieldwork remotely from the U.K. instead of physically visiting the site myself.

At the beginning, not being able to be in field seemed significant constraints. However, conducting remote and digital fieldwork due to sociopolitical concerns (e.g. Brandt, 2017; Postill, 2016; Ulmer & Cohen, 2016) or the pandemic restrictions (e.g. Grijalva, 2021; Jaehn, 2021) is not uncommon for anthropologists and ethnographers. Informed by the existing literature, I was able to go on the trail of a remote ethnographic inquiry. Furthermore, my thirty-plus years' lived experience and a decade of working in different multi-ethnic regions in Yunnan (see 1.2) have enabled me to gain close familiarity with the sociopolitical, cultural, economic, historical and natural environments there, which largely compensates for the Internet-mediated long-distance fieldwork. Postill (2016) buttresses this by arguing that "there is nothing inherently inferior or illegitimate about researching local issues remotely, or indeed retrospectively, especially for ethnographers with previous local experience" (p.67).

Likewise, my long-time acquaintance (for over a decade) with some participants (i.e. the restaurant owner and my former student) also compensates my missing out to some extent. As Brandt (2017) contends, regarding ethnographic fieldwork, "the insights that ensue from a long-standing personal relationship [between an ethnographer and his/her subjects] may provide more depth than conventional research methods" (p.507). In my case, what makes a trust personal relationship between me and my participants extremely important is that my major data sources (photos and video clips of the restaurant) were generated by them and then they shared with me on a selective basis (out of ethical considerations, see 5.3.3). In short, with my ethnographic inquiry conducted remotely via digital forms of communication, I still could collect enough data, not of less value than that collected in situ, to study real-life social phenomena.

That said, the digitized ethnographic practices unavoidably limited me to fully approach my research interests. Specifically, by using the digital technologies, my sensory experiences were limited to visual (photos and videos) and aural (interviews) dimensions. Given that the fieldwork was conducted at a restaurant and thus food

played a significant role, missing out especially on gustatory and olfactory experiences could be a loss. In this sense, there is no denying that the remote fieldwork is not the best choice for my research. However, as explained above, given the circumstances confronting me, it is definitely *not cheating* but "a remedial measure" or "a second best choice" (Postill, 2016:67). The following sections illustrate how exactly this remote ethnographic study worked out in the "field".

5.2.4 Summary

This section explains the telling characteristics of sociosemiotic ethnography, including its constructionist, interpretive, and reflexive nature, coupled with critical-analytic capacity. Following that, it elucidates the differences between linguistic ethnography, linguistic anthropology, and sociosemiotic ethnography. Based on the distinctions, this thesis argues that sociosemiotic ethnography better serves the purpose of this research. Despite sociosemiotic ethnography allows this research to explore the multi-semiotic features of and the structure-agency interplay in ethnicity (re)construction in the Chinese context, out of the consideration for sociopolitical reality and ethical issues, the fieldwork is conducted remotely. Section 5.3 sets out how data was collected remotely in an ethical manner and my positionality as an ethnographer.

5.3 Data collection from afar

5.3.1 Fieldwork

This remote ethnographic inquiry was conducted at a Dai culture themed restaurant in Yunnan, China, from December 2023 to July 2024. It also draws on my thirty-plus years of lived experience in that region, including my growing up in an ethnic minority autonomous county, five years' work experience as a schoolteacher in a multi-ethnic county located in the China-Myanmar borderland, and four years as a university instructor in a multi-ethnic city. This city is the gateway to Xishuangbanna. Through contacts built up over those years in that region, I was able to identify the key participants and win their complete trust. Their trust is extremely essential, because

this research explores ethnic status, which is sensitive now in China (see 1.2.2.1). Also owing to their trust, I was able to conduct this research through the Internet instead of on-site (see 5.4).

Regarding the Internet-mediated approach, the participants who created and/or worked at the restaurant in question sent me video clips and photos of their creations and the space where they worked via Microsoft Teams and/or Outlook. Informed by the visual data, I then interviewed the five participants via Microsoft Teams. During these interviews, the participants also shared their lived experiences with me, including language biography, study and work experiences, perceptions and knowledges of ethnic culture and identity, and geographic imagination (see 2.2.1). That said, due to seven/eight hours' time difference between the U.K. and China and the participants' own schedules, it was not easy to arrange interviews with the participants. That is why I did not manage to arrange a focus group meeting with all the participants at the end of the fieldwork as I had planned.

The environment of this study was the everyday ethnic restaurant setting in an urban area in Yunnan in which the Dai culture was expected, presented, and/or evaluated. The larger social contexts include sociopolitical and socioeconomic agendas concerning ethnic minority groups carried out by the state and the provincial government of Yunnan, as well as relevant policies, news reports, and articles circulated on the official websites. The people studied were local people in Yunnan, either belonging to the Dai or non-Dai communities, who engaged in the making of the restaurant and/or who could contribute to the understanding of the Dai culture. Although all being Yunnanese, they are from different backgrounds and have different lived experiences (see 5.3.2).

5.3.2 Participants

The five participants are relevant to the restaurant but to different extents. Specifically, Xuan, a Han, is one of the three restaurant owners and the major creator of the restaurant involving wall painting creation, interior and exterior designing, and food preparation; Duan is a Han, who is the co-creator of the wall-paintings at the restaurant; Huan is a former tour guide working and now living in Xishuangbanna, who is a Han and a relative of the restaurant owner Xuan; Guan is a friend of Xuan, who is a Dai from

Xishuangbanna; and Yuan is a former student (about 10 years ago) of mine, who is a Dai and has life experiences that were mentioned by the other participants (once being a monk in a Dai temple to learn the Dai script and still speaking the Dai language). The participants were selected mainly through Xuan's recommendation, except my former student. The details of the five participants are as follows. Notably, out of ethical consideration, the participants are referenced under pseudonyms.

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnic Identity	Languages Spoken
Xuan	Mid 30s	Female	Han	*Putonghua*, Yunnan dialect
Duan	Mid 30s	Female	Han	*Putonghua*, Yunnan dialect
Huan	Early 50s	Female	Han	*Putonghua*, Yunnan dialect
Guan	Late 30s	Female	Dai	*Putonghua*, Yunnan dialect
Yuan	Early 20s	Male	Dai	*Putonghua*, Yunnan dialect, Dai language

Table 1 The Research Participants

When I was negotiating accesses, my acquaintance Xuan and her business partners opened a Dai culture themed restaurant in the capital city of Yunnan, though none of them are Dai. I saw the photos and videos about the restaurant on her social media account, and I was amazed by the creation process and the designed restaurant with a strong ethnic vibe. After I had to give up my previous research plan, I contacted Xuan. She becomes the key participant of this research.

Xuan is a Han but she was born and grew up in an ethnic minority autonomous county, which is also one of the origins of the Dai group in Yunnan. In addition, her grandmother is a Bai (a minority group), but none of her other family members identifies as Bai. Xuan's first awareness and primary knowledges of the Dai people and their culture are from her aunt, Huan — another participant in this research, who has been working as a tourist guide and living in Xishuangbanna for more than two decades. Later over the decade when Xuan worked in a city adjacent to Xishuangbanna, she visited there frequently and experienced the local culture herself. Another participant Guan, who is a Dai and a long-time friend of Xuan, has also enriched Xuan's understanding of the Dai group. Guan was born and raised in a Dai village in Xishuangbanna, in which every

villager used the Dai language in their everyday life. When she was little, Guan could understand and even speak a little of the Dai language. However, since her family moved to the city and she started schooling, *Putonghua* and local Chinese dialect have become her everyday languages.

Xuan is always passionate about arts and creation. For this reason, she majored in interior design at university. Because of her professional knowledge, she and a long-time friend of her — Duan — have designed and created the restaurant, including the interior and exterior decors, the signage, artefacts and utensils. Duan is a Han and grew up with Xuan in the same county. Like Xuan, she also has some relatives living in Xishuangbanna and spent much of her childhood there. Despite their similar life experiences, as elaborated in 6.2, Duan and Xuan have different understandings of the Dai culture.

Given that none of these participants understand the Dai language, I recruited one of my former students — Yuan — from the multi-ethnic township where I worked as a volunteer teacher. Yuan is a Dai and still uses the Dai language when he talks to his family and spends time in his home village. In addition, he studied the Dai script in a local Buddhist temple when he was little, though he could not understand the script now due to lack of exposure to the language in his everyday life.

Regarding participant recruitment, I first contacted Xuan, a longtime acquaintance of mine. After Xuan and the other two restaurant owners gave me permission to conduct my study at their restaurant (see Appendix A), Xuan recommended the other three participants (Duan, Huan, and Guan) to me. During the interviews with them, they all mentioned that only Dai males were allowed to learn the Dai script in a Buddhist temple (see 6.2.2.1). It happens that one of my former students when I worked in the multi-ethnic county had such an experience. To understand the Dai culture better, especially related to the Dai language, I contacted my former student Yuan and he was happy to participate in this study. In sum, the participants' lived experiences and perceptions regarding ethnic minority groups, which are largely different from mine, have accelerated my understanding, especially of the socioeconomic context, in many ways.

Considering that ethnicity is a sensitive topic, it is extremely important to recruit these participants in an ethnically sound way and keep their information anonymity and confidential. How exactly these ends were achieved is elaborated in the next section.

5.3.3 Ethical considerations

The methodology, characterized by sociosemiotic ethnography with ethnic minority groups as the research subject, raised ethical issues concerning consent, the audio-recording and decoding of online interviews, the gathering and decoding of visual data (photos and video clips of the restaurant), and participant anonymity. Other collected data was published online and open to the public (documents of laws and policies, and news reports). To address the ethical concerns and apply for ethical approval, I undertook ethics training and familiarized myself with relevant ethics policies and practice codes. The regulations were issued by the University of Southampton and other international institutions, such as Research Support of the University of Oxford, American Anthropological Association, Human Research Protection Program (HRPP) of the University of Virginia[29]. Ethnics approval was granted by the University of Southampton on 06/11/2023 (ERGO II[8] Submission ID: 88894, see Appendices A, B, and C).

The ERGO II approval application took me five months, ending with the first research project being discarded and 100 supporting documents being submitted in total. It was a tough time for me, full of ups and downs (see 1.2.2.1). Honestly, if it was not because of my supervisors' support and encouragement, I would have given up my study. That said, I did give up my first research plan due to ethical issues. In brief, my planned fieldwork involved multiple sites (e.g. a university campus, potential student participants' family house, a local school) in a multi-ethnic region in China, but without approval from China, no encrypted devices are allowed to be imported to the country[30]; while the University of Southampton recommends researchers to use a (clean) university laptop to conduct research abroad for access to the university systems and out of ethical considerations. Furthermore, the to-be-collected data for my research, involving sensitive information like the potential participants' ethnic background, was required to be stored in an encrypted university computer; while there is restricted

[8] Ethics and Research Governance Online (ERGO II) is the University of Southampton centralized ethics management system.

access to VPN in China and therefore the university Microsoft OneDrive[31]. That means, I was stuck between two irreconcilable systems across two countries.

Moreover, I was later required by the Research Integrity and Governance committee (RIG) of University of Southampton, to double check there were no laws preventing my transferal of research data out of China and no local government approval was required for me to carry out my research there. To address these concerns, I consulted a lawyer and a government official in the region, but no explicit laws and administrative regulations regarding data collection for academic purpose were identified. That means, I cannot be sure if my transferal of research data out of China will be permitted or not. Moreover, RIG raised the concern that China was one of the high cyber-risk countries, in which Internet access to Western services could be problematic and VPN connections were frequently blocked (see Endnote 31). Cornered by these constraints, I had to give up my first research plan.

Because of the lesson learned from the first project preparation, for the second research, I chose a non-institutional site and conducted the fieldwork via Internet. Even so, while working through the ethics application process and the whole research, I gave greater weight to the specific ethical concerns with the participants' consent, anonymity, confidentiality, rights, and potential risks to them. The following two sections elucidate how these ethical issues were addressed.

5.3.3.1 Consent

The veracity of the participants' consent was ensured by following the protocols approved regarding this research. First, all participants received a Participant Information Sheet in Chinese which explains the research purpose, data collection and protection, as well as freedom and anonymity regarding participation before they gave their consent (see Appendix B). With their full understanding of their freedom of participation, anonymity, and potential contribution in relation to this research, before any data collection, they were provided with a consent form in Chinese (see Appendix C). The consent form explains that the participants can withdraw at any time for any reason, what kinds of data are to be collected, and how they are collected and stored. I reiterated these messages orally in *Putonghua* and Yunnan dialect before interviewing

the participants. In addition, I made sure that all participants had my contact details and understood they were welcome to ask me any questions regarding the research, including my use of the data collected from them (interview data, photos, and video clips) and their anonymity. Finally, all participants were specifically made aware that interviews were audio-recorded instead of video-recorded, out of the consideration for confidentiality (see below).

5.3.3.2 Confidentiality

To minimise any risks to participants and to keep them anonymous and confidential, I did not collect any identifying data including the participants' names and face images, and I obscured the restaurant name on the collected images. The participants are identified by a first-name pseudonym. In addition, the online interviews were conducted with the camera off on both sides and being audio-recorded only, and the recordings were deleted once they were transcribed. The photos, video clips, and audio-recorded interviews were transcribed with any reference to names (including the participants' names, the restaurant name, the name of their hometown) removed and other identifying information, such as the participants' contact information, confidential. That said, considering that the record of the online conversations and data sharing could theoretically be breached or hacked, outside my control, the participants were informed before the start of the fieldwork that they should only provide the information that they were prepared to be made public.

As for the images from photos and video clips about the restaurant, I only reproduced the images involving the common representations in that region and included the reproductions in my thesis for analysis. That means, I reproduced the images through picking common elements on the images to avoid the restaurant being identified and meanwhile blurred potentially identifying parts. Furthermore, all identifiable information will be destroyed when the research ends, including images (from photos and video-recordings) and participants' personal information including their Microsoft Teams accounts and Outlook accounts. Finally, the participants were informed that research findings made available in any reports or publications would not include any information that could directly identify them.

5.3.4 Researcher positionality

In 1.2, I have explained that, in terms of my background, geographically I am an insider in Yunnan while ethnically an outsider to the ethnic minority groups. I also have narrated how my positionality has changed from seeing myself on the opposite side to the institutional system at work, then to being regarded as an outsider by the local institution and the Chinese government during my negotiating access as a PhD student studying in the UK, and finally to seeing myself as an agentive ethnographer negotiating with various social forces and actors and mediating between different social systems. Note that I align with Day (2012), among others, who argues that a researcher's positionality is a co-construction in the research relationship. Moreover, the researcher is also positioned outside of the immediate context of the research relationship, that is, within the broader social structures such as international and national laws. In this sense, positionality is situated, multidimensional, and dynamic. That means, for one thing, my insider/outsider status is not clearly demarcated, depending on being viewed from whose perspective or measured by what criterion; for another, my positionality is shifting, actively or passively, as this research progresses.

5.4 Data organization and analysis

The raw materials for this study include photographs, video clips, audio-recorded interviews, fieldnotes including my reflections on my lived experience, and official documents such as national and provincial policies, news reports. These were gathered over my 8-month ethnographic fieldwork from December 2023 to July 2024, except the official documents which were continuously collected until writing up this thesis. This research process resulted in 116 photographs and 22 video clips for observation with notetaking, 400-minute audio-recorded and transcribed interviews, and 61 official documents and public articles (see Endnote). All the collected raw materials were anonymized and stored in electronic format in an encrypted university laptop and the University of Southampton's OneDrive system. This section elucidates how the raw

materials were collected, sorted, and initially coded based on the theoretical framework (see Chapter 4) and the research questions (see 4.6).

5.4.1 Raw materials and initial coding

The data collection of this ethnographic research was navigated by the theoretical and methodological framework (see Chapter 4 and 5.2) and the research questions (4.6), focusing on the interplay between social actors and forces, as well as multi-semiotic resources and practices. Specifically, the collected raw materials involve multi-semiotic resources and signs used and perceived by microlevel actors to represent ethnic minority culture and identity, their multi-semiotic practices to (re)construct and authenticate an ethnic themed restaurant, their experiences living in Yunnan and knowledges of ethnicity, as well as socio-political discourses regarding ethnicity in China which embody certain social mechanisms and ideologies. Accordingly, the datasets were categorized as micro- and meso-and-macro levels, which were subcategorized by data type:

(1) Microlevel data

a. Visual records (i.e. photos and video clips) of multi-semiotic practices and semiotic assemblages at the Dai culture themed restaurant;

b. Audio recorded online interviews with the participants;

c. Memoing during data collection and coding, including my reflection.

(2) Meso- and macrolevel data

Laws, policies, news reports, and articles published on official and institutional websites (i.e. official discursive data) relevant to ethnicity.

Such an approach to data organization at this phase is deductive or a prior coding, which sets the stage for subsequent inductive analysis (see Bingham, 2023; Bingham & Witkowsky, 2022).

5.4.1.1 Observation data

This dataset includes materials regarding the available semiotic resources and signs and the use of them in the making and design of the restaurant. That is, observations of

gathered photos and video clips about the participants' use of various semiotic resources and signs to decorate the restaurant were carried out with extensive notes, coupled with observations of the semiotic assemblages at the restaurant (e.g. wall paintings, food presentation). During the fieldwork, two participants (Xuan and Duan) working at the restaurant were asked to record the multi-semiotic practices and the semiotic assemblages at the restaurant via photography and videorecording without any identifiable information, and then to share the raw materials with me through Microsoft Outlook email.

While sorting out the materials, I described and analyzed the photos and videos in detail until no new themes or codes emerged. This coding stage was navigated by the theoretical and methodological framework and the research questions, as well as the reviewed empirical studies (see 3.2). At this initial coding stage, the potential themes included

- available and accessible semiotic resources and signs as markers of ethnic minority culture and identity;
- participants' multi-semiotic practices to construct and authenticate a Dai culture themed restaurant.

Based on the observations and the potential themes, I outlined interview topics and questions. A further and detailed analytical exploration of semiotic resources and practices and the social imprints on them was conducted through the lens of CASs (see 5.4.2.1) at a later stage of data coding.

5.4.1.2 Interview data

This dataset includes information about the participants' understanding and perceptions of ethnic minority people and their cultures, the participants' background and identification, and their lived experiences especially relevant to ethnicity. The interviews encouraged and focused on the participants' own knowledges, namely, *subjugated knowledges* (see 5.2.1) (see Table 2 for the interview topics and sample questions). Specifically, I conducted interviews with the five participants via Microsoft Teams with camera off. The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded and lasted from 30 to 60 minutes. I interviewed Xuan, Yuan, and Huan twice individually, as well as

Guan and Duan once; and Xuan along with Duan as a focus group for one time. In total, I conducted nine interviews, lasting approximately 400 minutes. Interviews were all recorded on an encrypted university laptop and then transcribed and stored in it. My conversations with the participants were primarily in *Putonghua*, but often with Yunnan dialect interspersed.

I transcribed, coded, and categorized the recordings after each interview, and translated most of the transcripts into English, coupled with reflective fieldnotes. When all the interviews were completed, I listened to the recordings again, re-read the transcripts and my memos, compared the recurrent themes among the interviews and with those from observations, and collected follow-up, the participants' validation, or online discursive data if any clarification was needed. I also excerpted interview data and official document data relevant to the categories for sequent analysis. That means, during this coding stage, cross-dataset comparisons, memoing, and discursive data collection were ongoing simultaneously. In this way, I looked for recurrences and more implicit data fitting within an identified category. Themes emerged from this phase were categorized as follows:

- participants' lived experience relevant to ethnicity;
- their perceptions and knowledges of ethnic culture and identity;
- their awareness and understanding of sociopolitical and historical changes regarding ethnicity;
- their identification as someone living in a multi-ethnic region.

Van Dijk (1993, 2006, 2015) asserts that microlevel actors' everyday discourses are imprinted with certain social markers, though not explicitly discernible. To trace the social influences on the participants' perceptions and knowledges of ethnicity, I gathered official discursive materials regarding ethnic minorities in Yunnan (see 5.4.1.3).

5.4.1.3 Official discursive data

I collected official documents, news reports, and articles which are open to the public and available on the official websites, including the official websites of People's Government of Yunnan Province (https://www.yn.gov.cn/), the state

(https://www.gov.cn/) and relevant departments such as the State Council Information Office (SCIO) (http://english.scio.gov.cn/); and institutional websites such as *Xinhua* Net 新华网 (https://english.news.cn/home.htm), *China Daily* (https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/), *Global Times* (https://www.globaltimes.cn/), *Qiushi* Journal 求是网 (http://en.qstheory.cn/), and *Guang Ming* 光明网(http://www.gmw.cn/). The official texts collected were either in Chinese or in English. To understand the texts and contexts better, I tried to collect both Chinese and English versions of similar sociopolitical events. Given that these discourses are not systematically published by the government or a designated institution, I have provided the publishing details of each in Endnotes as a referencing list.

These data were collected to trace and examine how social systems impacted individuals' everyday practices and perceptions regarding ethnicity. To this end, through the lens of CDA (see 5.4.2.2), I comprehensively analyzed the discursive data to uncover sociopolitical ideologies relevant to ethnicity (see van Dijk, 2001, 2006) and then comparatively analysed how individuals' discourses and perceptions (from the interview data) struggle or align with the social systems encoded in official and public discourses. Through cross-dataset comparisons and discourse analysis, further implicit data fitting within the emerged thematic categories were identified. That is,

- an ecological agenda constituted in the sociopolitical discourses regarding ethnicity and a *yuanshengtai* discourse embodied in individuals' articulations of ethnicity;
- an intersection of the provincial image crafting and social actors' identification.

5.4.1.4 Summary and recurrent thematic categories

In this section, I demonstrate the collected raw materials and the initial coding adopted to analyse the materials. The thematic categories reoccurred and emerged in this stage include:

- multi-semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers;
- semiosis/multi-semiotic practices to represent and (re)construct ethnic culture and identity;

- social actors' lived experience, perceptions, and knowledges regarding ethnicity;
- sociopolitical and public policies and news reports as an embodiment of social mechanisms and ideologies regarding ethnicity;
- intertextual links between microlevel and meso-and-macrolevel discourses regarding the integration of ethnicity and ecological governance;
- entanglement between provincial identity (re)construction by capitalizing on ethnicity and microlevel actors' identification with ethnic minority groups.

To make full sense of the collected data and emerged themes, analytical methods, including a critical analysis of semiotic resources and signs (CASs) and a critical analysis of sociopolitical and public discourses (CDA) are adopted. The following section elucidates how and why these two critical-analytical methods are capable to achieve these ends.

5.4.2 Methods of analysis

As elaborated in 5.2, sociosemiotic ethnography essentially is a critical-analytic inquiry. It aims to systematically and critically interpret social processes and individuals' semiotic practices/semiosis, as well as their entanglements (Vannini, 2007). To this end, sociosemiotic ethnography draws upon the critical tradition of social analysis for sociosemiotic studies. Meanwhile, it also contributes to critical social analysis with specified focuses on semiotic practices and on relations between semiotic resources and extra-semiotic conditions (e.g. power relations, social mechanisms, ideologies). According to Fairclough (2001, 2013), "critical social analysis can be understood as normative and explanatory critique", concerned with values and causes (2013:9-10; 2001:125). It is *normative critique* in the sense that it not only describes existing social realities but also "assesses the extent to which they match up to various values". It is *explanatory critique* because it describes existing realities and more importantly explains how and why they have come to be the way they are (Fairclough, 2013:9-10).

With the two critiques, I am able to present and evaluate the "social structuring of semiotic diversity" (e.g. available semiotic resources and assemblages) and also trace and explain how and why "the productive semiotic work" (e.g. resemiotized resources

and signs) is created through and for particular semiotic practices in a given social context (Fairclough, 2001:124). Moreover, an ethnographic dimension is central to understanding the (re)semiotization and (re)assemblage of semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers and their attached meaning as they are mobilized over time and across contexts. With the critical and ethnographic lenses, my analyses attend to the interconnection between semiotic resources and practices, the(re)making of ethnic representations (e.g. resemiotized signs, the design of the ethnic restaurant), and broader sociopolitical structures (e.g. ethnicity related sociopolitical agendas, political and economic discourses). To these ends, the focuses of this sociosemiotic-ethnographic analysis include the mobilized semiotic resources and signs, individuals' (multi-)semiotic practices, and the created semiotic assemblages in the Dai culture themed restaurant, as well as the relations between multi-semiotic practices and semiotic assemblage (re)production, and between individuals' agency and the power exercise at the meso- (e.g. regional and local governments) and macrolevel (e.g. the state).

5.4.2.1 Critical analysis of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs (CASs)

The primary dimensions of sociosemiotic analysis include multi-semiotic modes and discourses (van Leeuwen, 2005). With semiotic modes or resources attached with meaning through social practices or discourse in a particular context, they are (re)semiotized and registered as signs (Iedema, 2003; van Leeuwen, 2015). Based on this recognition, Vannini (2004) argues that sociosemiotic analytics should attend to "the process of *production*, *distribution*, *and assumption of signs*" and understand the multiple functions and meanings of a sign in a specific social context (pp.4-5, originally emphasized). Peirce's analytical concepts — iconicity, indexicality, and symbolicity — can serve these purposes, which are concerned with semiotic resources and their multiple meanings and changes assigned by sign makers and interpreters within specific sociohistorical contexts. That means, these concepts enable me to analyse the sociohistorical shaping and the cultural origins of semiotic resources and signs and meanwhile trace the interplay between individuals' agency and the social mechanisms embedded in (re)semiotization processes.

The capacity of these concepts to deal with the interconnections between semiotic resources and signs, sign-makers, semiosis, and social contexts, relies on Peirce's triadic models of signs. Specifically, for social semioticians, the unity of a sign involves a *referent* (object/semiotic resource), a sign vehicle/mode (*representamen* — the form that a sign takes) (re)made to express the referent, and the sense made by a sign-maker and an interpreter/sign-remaker of the relation between the two (i.e. *interpretant*) (Keane, 2003; Kress, 2010; Vannini, 2007). In other words, signs are from and for semiosis with semiotic resources in various forms, which are shaped by sign-makers involving their interpretations, perceptions, lived experiences, etc. and meanwhile afforded and constrained by the social contexts in which sign-making occurs and produced signs make sense (e.g. Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010, 2011; Volosinov, 1973). That means, the intertwined relationship between signs, semiosis, sign (re)makers, and the social context in which they engage, is embodied in the enregisterment (i.e. social recognition, Agha, 2024) of semiotic resources as icons, indexes, and symbols (Keane, 2003). The enregisterment process involves (re)modalization and (re)semiotization of semiotic resources, which is underpinned and mediated by *semiotic ideology* (Keane, 2003, 2005, 2018).

Semiotic ideologies are "people's underlying assumptions about what signs are, what functions signs do or do not serve, and what consequences they might or might not produce" (Keane, 2018:65). The underlying assumptions vary across social and historical contexts. As such, semiotic ideology plays a mediating role between semiotic resources, agentive actors, and acted-upon objects in social life (Keane, 2003) and thus links general semiotic processes with specific judgements of social, cultural, political, and ethical value (Keane, 2018). For these reasons, Kress (2001) asserts that "*[t]he social is in the sign*" (p.80, originally emphasized).

There are three basic categories of Peircean signs, namely, indexes, icons, and symbols. The classification is according to the relations of signs with which they represent in the world, and their function is also shaped in and by these relations, except symbolic ones which are conventional and arbitrary (Kress, 2010). Specifically, *indexicality* is based on actual, physical, or causal connection between a sign and its referent/object (Merrell, 2001; Nakassis, 2018). According to Peirce, for example, smoke may indicate/index the presence of fire. In this sense, indexical signs are essentially related to the context in which they occur, and this connection is factual not

interpretive (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Nakassis, 2018). In practice, to take something as an index, perceivers must believe that it does have the factual and spatiotemporal connection as is claimed (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). For instance, to judge whether the dishes served at an ethnic restaurant are indexically authentic, a diner must be assured that, for example, the cook is a member of that ethnic group, the recipes are from that ethnic group, or the ingredients are from that ethnic area.

Iconicity is a matter of resemblance which tells perceivers the qualities of its referents/objects and strongly associated with the phenomenological experience relying on perceivers' senses (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Keane, 2003, 2005). Put another way, according to Peirce, to view something as an icon, perceivers must have certain pre-existing knowledge or expectations in their minds to assess its resemblance (Grayson & Martinec, 2004). Since resemblance is undetermined, to assess features that count towards resemblance, some social criteria and conventions are required. That means, iconicity is inextricably involved in other social processes and thus enmeshed with the dynamics of social power and value (Keane, 2003, 2005). For example, to assess whether an ethnic culture themed restaurant is iconically authentic, a diner must have some idea, detailed or not, through personal experiences or media, of what a restaurant themed in this ethnic culture tends to look like and how dishes from this ethnic group tend to look and taste.

Note that indexicality and iconicity are not mutually exclusive. According to Peirce, "every perceived cue has iconic and indexical properties (CP.2 306)" but perception sometimes emphasizes indexicality over iconicity and vice versa (CP.2 276, in Grayson & Martinec, 2004:298). Therefore, some things can be viewed as being both indexically and iconically authentic, which is also the case for symbolic signs (see below). It is worth mentioning that the recognition of signs with the potential to (inter)change/transform, or be *resemiotized* (Iedema, 2001, 2003), addresses Kress's (2010) concern with the application of Pierce's classification of signs in social semiotics. Kress's concern lies in that these terms allow for "little bits of arbitrariness" in the relation between form and meaning in sign-making (p.65). For him, arbitrariness indicates a social power which is strong enough to bind any form and any meaning together, leaving no room for change or sign-makers' agency (p.63). The recognized possibility of signs to be resemiotized/transformed responds to, partially if not fully, Kress's rejection of these terms in social semiotics.

Lastly, *symbolicity* is a function of conventional rule or habit. This means that symbols are not connected to their referents/objects in any real way as with indexes and they share no resemblance as with icons (Merrell, 2001; Metro-Roland, 2009; Nakassis, 2018). A typical example is languages. That said, like iconicity and indexicality, the interpretation of symbolic signs is based on prior knowledge, such as cultural and linguistic ones (Paraskevaidis & Weidenfeld, 2021). In the case of an ethnic restaurant, given the conventional nature of symbolicity, any language, verbal or/and oral, of that ethnic group can provide diners with "tangible evidence" of authenticity.

In sum, semiotic resources that are or are to be enregistered and actualized for semiosis in continuous semiotization/resemiotization can "be one of resemblance (*iconicity*), actual connection (*indexicality*), or rule (*symbolism*)" (Keane, 2005:186). That means, through exploring existing signs, I can unpack the (re)making of meaning in a specific context and attend to various values that are attached to the generated signs — a normative critique (Fairclough, 2013). The following section provides an explanatory lens — CDA, which traces and explains how and why semiotic resources and signs come to be the way they are.

5.4.2.2 Critical analysis of discourse and its relationship with multilevel contexts

In this research, special attention is paid to how the microlevel semiosis and the provincial level discourses echo and contribute to/are constrained by macro-level discourses, and how these discourses manifest in the everyday semiosis. This examination is the focus of my CDA. Aligning with CASs above, I also situate CDA within an ethnographic context so that ethnography can contextualize the (inter)discursive analysis. As such, the critical-analytic and context-sensitive perspective enables me to unpack how the semiotic and discursive construction of social resources and practices change and interact over time and across multilevel contexts. Similarly, Vannini (2004) also argues that, apart from the attention given to signs in sociosemiotic analytics, more weight should be given to how various ideological discourses get involved in the process of (re)construction, (re)use, and interpretation of semiotic resources and signs. All *discourses*, as van Leeuwen (2005) elaborates, derive from social practices insomuch as they are fundamentally "*socially constructed knowledges of some aspect of reality*" (p.94, originally emphasized; see also 2.2.2). In other words, the discourses that people

use to represent social practices are versions of those practices *plus* the ideas and attitudes that attach to them in the contexts where those people use them (ibid., p.104, originally emphasized). In this sense, discourses are not only about social practices — what and how — but also the perceptions and ideologies underpinning these practices — why.

The interpretation of discourses as contextualized and shared knowledges resonates with van Dijk's (2001) explanation of ideologies — more precisely ideological based group knowledge (pp.15-16). According to van Dijk (2001), *ideologies* are a form of shared social cognitions and serve as the basis of social representations (e.g. knowledges, beliefs, attitudes, values, norms) and practices including discourses, and meanwhile discourses serve to express, enact, reproduce, and challenge ideologies. That means, discourses and ideologies are mutually constitutive and inextricably intertwined. Moreover, ideologies function as certain social cognitive interface between social structures and social actors' discourses and other social practices within a social context (van Dijk, 2006:117). In other words, by attending to ideologies prevalent in a context, it is possible to trace and explore the relation between the social structures and social actors' agency within that context. Furthermore, ideologies consist of social representations which specify general sociocultural values of a social group and define their social identity (van Dijk, 2006). That means, identification processes fundamentally rest on the shared knowledges and representations, or ideologies (van Dijk, 2001:14). Viewed in this light and given the mutually constructive relation between ideology and discourse, both ideologies and discourses are at play in the processes of social identification.

Notably, this research, aligning with van Dijk (e.g. 1993, 2001, 2006), attends to ideologies in general terms. That is, it recognizes that the basic functions of ideologies are to "self-represent the group and the membership and identification of its members, to organize their social practices or struggle, and to promote the interests of the group and its members with respect to other groups" (van Dijk, 2006:132). In the same vein, Keane (2018) asserts that semiotic ideology is manifested in individuals' capacity to make and use signs within a specific social and historical context and helps to unpack possible semiotic resources and their different modalities. That means, attention to semiotic ideologies helps to understand not only semiotic processes but also social, cultural, and political processes with which they intertwined. As such, a critical analysis

of discourses regarding semiotic resources and practices and their underlying ideologies enables to reveal how semiotic resources and signs are mobilized to (re)construct sociocultural representations of a given social context and for what purposes or for whose interests. To this end, clarification of CDA is needed.

CDA, according to Fairclough (2001), is

> [an] analysis of the dialectical relationships between semiosis (including language) and other elements of social practices. Its particular concern is with the radical changes that are taking place in contemporary social life, with how semiosis figures within processes of change, and with shifts in the relationship between semiosis and other social elements within networks of practices (p.123).

That means, CDA not only focuses on semiosis but also on the relations between semiotic discourse and extra-semiotic structures (Fairclough, 2013). In this sense, *discourses* are "semiotic ways of construing aspects of the world (physical, social or mental) that can generally be identified with different positions or perspectives of different groups of social actors" (ibid., p.11). This definition resonates with those elaborated by van Dijk (2001) and van Leeuwen (2005), all recognizing the socially constructed nature of discourses which emerge from and play out in the semiotic practices and process within a specific sociocultural context.

Despite the merits of this version of CDA, the challenge of decoding discourses through a sociosemiotic lens lies in unpacking the complex multilevel interconnections (van Dijk,1993). According to van Dijk (1993), one major complication for analysts to address is "that typical macro-notions such as group or institutional power and dominance, as well as social inequality, do not directly relate to typical micro-level-notions such as text, talk or communicative interaction" (pp.250-251). To tackle this issue, van Dijk (1993, 2015) proposes to examine in detail the role of social representations in the minds of social actors, that is, *social cognitions*. Although embedded in individuals' minds, social cognitions, such as beliefs, perceptions, ideologies, norms, and values — "evaluative social representations" (ibid., 1993:258) — are essentially social in the sense that "they are shared and presupposed by group members, monitor social action and interaction, and [...] they underlie the social and cultural organization of society as a whole" (ibid., p.257). In brief, social cognitions mediate between micro, meso- and

macro levels of society, between discourse and action, between the individual and the group (ibid.). Similarly, Hutchins (1995) also asserts that cognition involves far beyond the brain, including external semiotic resources, other social actors, and sociocultural systems for making sense of the real world (in Pennycook, 2024). That means, social cognitions help to reveal the production, interpretation, and impacts of dominant discourse.

Building on this argument, several ways to bridge and analyze the societal micro-meso-macro gap are proposed. For one thing, the gap can be addressed through attending to the connections between actions and processes. That is, individual actors' social practices are constituent parts of group actions and social processes (van Dijk,2015:468). For example, at the Dai-culture themed restaurant in this research, the individuals' multi-semiotic practices such as creating wall paintings which feature the local ecosystem and ethnic minority traditions echo the promotion of ethno- and ecotourism in Yunnan. For another, the multiscale gap can be bridged through approaching the interplay between local-level practices and social structure, because situations of discursive interaction at a microscale are part or constitutive of social structure (ibid., p.469). To illustrate, the design of an ethnic culture themed restaurant, which mobilizes various semiotic resources and signs and engages various social actors (i.e. multi-semiotic/discursive (inter)actions) to commodify certain ethnic cultural resources (e.g. cuisine, artefacts) but meanwhile resemiotized/transformed others (e.g. ethnic minority languages), may showcase meso-/macrolevel structures (e.g. multiculturalism coupled with monolingualism which is underpinned by the Confucian philosophy of harmony, see 2.3.1).

5.4.2.3 Summary

In conclusion, the two critical-analytic methods serve the purposes of this research well. This research explores the accessible semiotic resources and signs in a multi-ethnic region, particularly focusing on multi-semiotic practices and the emergent semiotic assemblages in that social context. It aims to understand the ways in which available semiotic resources are enregistered/(re)semiotized as indexical, iconic, symbolic signs to represent ethnic minority groups, and how they are mobilized, negotiated, assembled, and perceived in that social context. To these ends, the critical-

analytic lens of sociosemiotic ethnography helps me to interpret various semiotic resources and signs mobilized as cultural representations in ethnicity (re)constructing. Moreover, this research attempts to explore, during ethnicity (re)construction, why particular entanglements of people, things, and places are drawn together. To this end, the CDA elaborated above, which attends to the connections between semiosis and other social elements, serves to unpack the entanglements.

5.4.3 Summary

This section demonstrates how the raw materials were collected, organized, and categorized at the initial stage of this research. With the initial coding, main themes emerged and categorized. To systematically and comprehensively analyze the themes, this section argues that the analytic capacities of sociosemiotic ethnography lie in a critical analysis of signs (i.e. semiotic resources attached with meaning) and a critical analysis of discourse across multilevel contexts. Specifically, CASs is used to interpret semiotic resources as ethnic markers/signs and the (re)semiotization and (re)assemblages of these resources; and CDA is adopted to trace and examine how various discourses are entangled in the (re)construction of ethnic culture and identity and how structure-agency dynamics play out in this entanglement. The following two chapters showcase how these two critical-analytic lenses serve the purposes of this research.

5.5 Limitations and research trustworthiness

This research adopted the multiple analytic foci on semiotic resources and signs, social actors' multi-semiotic practices, lived experiences, and perceptions, and sociopolitical ideologies embodied in official discourses, which aligns with the constructionist, sociosemiotic, and ethnographic recognition of the intersubjective nature of knowledge production — the (re)construction of ethnicity in this case (see 2.2, 4.2, 4.3, and 5.2.1). Such an approach constitutes certain limitations, apart from the political and institutional constraints and ethical issues elaborated in 1.2.2.1, 5.2.3, and 5.3.3. This

section elucidates how I address the limitations regarding trustworthiness and authenticity.

There are various measures to take in qualitative research in terms of trustworthiness, consistency, reliability, and authenticity (e.g. Leung, 2015; Noble & Smith, 2015), but Leung (2015) also notes that "qualitative research handles nonnumerical information and their phenomenological interpretation, which inextricably tie in with human senses and subjectivity" (p.324). That means, although diverse perspectives from both researchers and their subjects add extra dimensions to interpretation and thus enrich the findings, they may also result in undesirable biases. To enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research, Noble and Smith (2015) propose researchers to acknowledge "that the methods undertaken and findings are intrinsically linked to the researchers' philosophical position, experiences and perspectives", as well as buttressed by their reflexivity (p.34). Echoing them, this research encompasses my — as both an ethnographic researcher and an insider to the studied community and sociocultural context — lived experience, positionality, and my reflection on my perspectives and experiences (see 1.2 and 5.3.4).

Moreover, I have attempted to be transparent to the participants and the readers regarding data collection, storage, use, coding, and analysis (see 1.2.1.2, 5.3 and 5.4). Where I have drawn on my assumptions and beliefs in my interpretation or analysis of a particular interview excerpt, I have invited the participants to comment on the interview transcript and confirmed my understanding with the participants themselves. To achieve trustworthiness within the reflexive and critical paradigm, I have also disclosed my assumptions, beliefs and sequent reflections in 1.2.2, 8.4.3 and 8.4.4.2.

5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has elucidated a constructionist, interpretive, reflexive, and critical-analytic method for the sociosemiotic ethnography of ethnicity, taking a Dai culture themed restaurant in Yunnan, China as an example. Then it has outlined the systematic, ethical, and valid recruitment of participants as well as collection of photos and video clips about the restaurant for observation, audio-recorded interviews with five participants, gathering of official discursive data, and field notes including my

reflection. Accordingly, the collected materials were categorized into different datasets. Then it has demonstrated how the materials were sorted and coded initially based on the theoretical and methodological framework and the research questions. In addition, it has also elucidated the overarching analytical framework of critical social semiotics coupled with ethnography, that is, a critical lens for interpreting semiotic resources and signs assembled at the restaurant and a CDA lens for examining the entanglements of social structure and agency in the (re)construction of ethnic markers across various scales. To contextualize this methodological lens and critically analyze ethnic markers, Chapter 6 ethnographically describes and explores the Dai culture themed restaurant in Yunnan where I conducted the fieldwork remotely.

Chapter 6 Critical analysis of semiotic resources and signs

6.1 Introduction

Culture and history are regarded as the substance of ethnicity and, as the basic materials used to (re)construct ethnic meaning, they are intertwined in ethnic construction and reconstruction (Fenton, 2010; Nagel,1994). Specifically, the meaning and interpretation of particular ethnic groups change over time, mainly because of "the *reconstruction* of historical culture and the *construction* of new culture" (Nagel, 1994:162, originally emphasized). The (re)construction of ethnic culture, from a social constructionist perspective (see 2.2), involves both ethnic groups/individuals and external forces and actors. The (re)construction is enacted through two ways: cultural creation and alteration, which occur when new cultural forms and practices are created or when current cultural elements are altered; and cultural reconstruction and revitalization, which happen when "dying" cultural forms and practices are excavated, reformed, and reintegrated into contemporary culture (Nagel, 1994:162-163). The (re)construction of the Dai ethnicity in China showcases the complicated interplay between culture and history, involving cultural creation, alteration, reconstruction, and revitalization.

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), traditional knowledge and cultural beliefs of ethnic minority groups in southwest China (e.g. the Dai people's worship of holy hills, see 6.3.1) were stigmatized as superstitious and backward and suppressed by the state (Henin & Flaherty, 1994; Tapp, 2010; Xu et al, 2005). As a result, the breakdown of their traditional practices and cultural beliefs led to not only cultural identity issues but also a loss of knowledges of natural resource use and management. For example, Xu and Ribot (2004) point out that the political chaos fuelled deforestation in many mountainous and ecologically sensitive areas at that time (in Xu et al., 2005:8). However, since the 1980s, with the emergence of the market economy in China, ethnic minorities were granted with certain degree of autonomy regarding cultural and economic affairs, such as agricultural land use and forest management (Henin & Flaherty, 1994). Against this backdrop, traditional knowledges and practices of natural

resource use within the ethnic minority communities were reestablished (Henin & Flaherty, 1994; Xu, et al, 2005).

That said, the newly formed market economy also gave rise to mass migration (largely a sharp increase of the Han migrants in the minority areas), tourism, and cash crop plantations (e.g. rubber trees) in the ethnic minority regions (e.g. Henin & Flaherty, 1994; Xu & Ribot, 2004). They have become the new subjects of controversy, such as assimilation of ethnic minority cultures and identities to those of the Han (e.g. language assimilation), over exploitation of agricultural and forested lands and resources, and commodification of ethnic culture (e.g. Henin & Flaherty, 1994; Tapp, 2010; Zhou, 2000, 2011, 2019). In brief, at this stage, the economic value through capitalizing on ethnic minorities is given much more weight than the cultural and symbolic values attached to these groups. It is essentially underpinned by the ideologies orienting to economic development (see 7.3.3).

Comparatively, in contemporary China, ethnic harmony (see 2.3.1.1, 2.3.1.2 and 7.2) and sustainable development (see 3.3.2 and 7.3.2) are further foregrounded. They have attached greater value to ethnic minority cultures, especially the minority groups' traditional knowledges and practices in relation to natural resource use and ecological conservation (e.g. Wu, 2016, 2017; Zeng, 2019). In sum, the (re)construction of the Dai ethnicity epitomizes culture as built-up meaning, which sheds light on how people think, believe, behave in a local space and across time (Fenton, 2010; LeCompte & Schensul, 2010; Nagel, 1994).

Based on this, this chapter explores and analyses, from the lens of sociosemiotic ethnography, what ethnic meanings and how they are created, altered, and reconstructed, and equally important, for what purpose. Specifically, with its focus on various semiotic resources and signs as markers of the Dai, it traces how they are resemiotized and (re)assembled to represent the Dai ethnicity in contemporary China. In this sense, this chapter addresses the Research Questions: (RQ1) What semiotic resources and signs are available and (re)semiotized to represent ethnic minorities in the multi-ethnic region in Yunnan Province, China, and particularly how are they mobilized and assembled at the Dai culture themed restaurant? (RQ2) How do individuals interpret, use, (re)semiotize, (re)locate, and (re)assemble available semiotic resources and signs for the design and authentication of an ethnic themed restaurant?

6.2 The making of a Dai culture themed restaurant

A *themed restaurant* — a social and cultural formation — refers to "an eating establishment which clothes itself in a complex of distinctive signs that are largely extraneous to the activity of eating itself" (Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999:228). When branded as being ethnic, with the provision of an ethnically marked cuisine, an ethnic themed restaurant "entails the use of ethnic art, decor, music, external façade, name, and various stereotyped signals to create a distinctive setting which lays claim to being a reflection of some exotic but recognisable culture" (ibid., p.242). These ethnic cultural markers reflect long-held constructed interconnections between foods, places and people (Cook & Crang,1996, in Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999). That is why such restaurants "have also been used by local people and consumers to express their concerns and highlight or blur existing identity boundaries (Watson 1987; Yan 2005, 81)" (Wu, 2014:159). Viewed in this light, a themed restaurant is essentially a symbolic space (Shelton, 1990). The Dai culture themed restaurant in question is such a space. To decipher this symbolic space through a sociosemiotic-ethnographic lens, section 6.2.1 depicts what this space, which is constituted of semiotic assemblages, looks like, and then section 6.2.2 illustrates how the (sub)semiotic assemblages including interior and exterior decors, wall paintings, and ethnic foods are designed and created through multi-semiotic practices and with various semiotic resources and signs.

6.2.1 The restaurant as semiotic assemblages

The Dai culture themed restaurant (DJL hereafter) is located in a suburb area of the capital city of Yunnan, but it does not lack of the hustle and bustle of the downtown. Actually, the restaurant is near the World Horti-Expo Garden[32], which is a space assembled with various local flora and created through the joint efforts of the provincial government and related institutions to represent the biodiversity in Yunnan. The Horti-Expo has attracted millions of domestic and oversea tourists since it was opened to the public in 1999, and there are residential parks and commercial districts in this area.

DJL is in one of the newly-constructed commercial buildings surrounding a residential park, which look modern and minimalistic with dark-grey and beige walls, large and transparent floor-to-ceiling glass doors in the dark grey metal frames (see Image 6.1). The restaurant signage, in the middle right above the two large doors, is in simple Chinese script, which echoes the simplicity of the building. On the right of the restaurant name is the restaurant logo, a simplified triangle-shaped Buddhist temple with the Dai script of the restaurant name on the bottom floor of the temple. Both the Chinese script and the logo are lit with light in pale gold, which resembles the color of golden Buddhist temples in Xishuangbanna. In Xishuangbanna, Theravada Buddhism is the dominant religion among the Dai people, so they hold numerous activities at Buddhist temples (Zeng, 2019).

Image 6.1 Exterior of DJL

Along the space to the doors, there are potted flowers in full blossom. On both sides of the doors, there are stone statues shaped in Asian elephants (see Image 6.2). Elephants are a symbol of good luck for the Dai people (Facts and Details, n.d.)[33]. These statues are also pots planted with colourful flowers. Between the two doors, there is a large potted Bird of Paradise — a typical tropic plant. In front of the plant, there is a one-meter-high floor-standing chalkboard, functioning as an advertising board. On the board, the Chinese name of the restaurant, surrounded by a red circle, is in the upper middle. Below the name, there are red words recommending some Dai specialties. On the upper right corner and the lower left corner, there are some banana leaves and a

coconut tree respectively, which are common plants in Xishuangbanna. According to the folk story passed down within the Dai communities, during the Dian Kingdom (滇国, 278-109 BC), some subgroups of the Dai travelled southwards to southeast Asia for resources. A vanguard team left banana stems on the way as road markers for the laggard teams to follow. However, when the laggard teams found the stems, they already grew new leaves. Realizing that they were far behind the vanguard team, the laggard teams stayed where they found the newly grown banana trees (Qu, 2013). For this reason, banana trees are historically and culturally significant for the Dai people.

Image 6.2 a glimpse of the linguistic landscape at DJL

Upon entering the doors, there is a grey doormat with black words in both traditional Chinese and English, reading “Artist Entrance” (艺术家请进 *yishujia qingjin*). These words seem to prepare the diners for an art show, both visually and gustatorily. It turns out that, once stepping into the doors, the diners will find themselves in a totally different vibe (see Image 6.3). It is in sharp contrast to the vibe created by the modern and minimalistic commercial building. In the entrance hall, the space is lit by a string of pendant lights. The hallow light shades are woven from bamboo strips, which is one of the prominent material elements in this restaurant.

Image 6.3 Interior of DJL

Bamboos are an important carrier of the Dai culture and history, which are widely used in building, cooking (as utensils and ingredients), and crafting (Huang, 2023). It is because the subtropical climate and geographic location where the Dai people have been inhabiting since 200 B.C. (Pei, 1988) are ideal for bamboos, which make them a sustainable natural resource for the local people. Moreover, the resilient nature of bamboos makes them useful building materials. In sum, the full use of bamboos, such as culms as building materials and household utensils and shoots as delicacy, manifests the Dai people's belief in the harmonious coexistence between man and nature. Apart from the cultural, historical, and ecological meanings of bamboos for the Dai, bamboos are also an ornamental plant cultivated in the yards of the Buddhist temples in Xishuangbanna. The cultivation of plants in the temple yards is specified by the temple documents, and these specified plants are known as temple plants (Pei, 1985). That means, bamboos are also religiously significant for the Dai.

The dining area of DJL is two-storey, with the first floor being open and highly decorated and the upper floor as a private dining room screened by straw curtains. The structure resembles that of the traditional Dai stilted bamboo houses in Xishuangbanna, of which, given the high level of heat and humidity in the local area, the upper floor is the living area and the open space below is commonly used to raise livestock (Huang, 2023). In the traditional stilted houses, the walls, the ceilings, and the floors are mainly made of bamboos, with thatch. The stilted houses in Xishuangbanna indicate the Dai

people's knowledge of local natural resource use and long-rooted environmental awareness (ibid.). In brief, the structural design of stilted houses, the use of natural resources, and the overall layout which usually blends with the surrounding environment epitomize the Dai people's knowledges and traditions passed down for generations, coupled with their reverence for and gratitude to nature.

Standing in the entrance hall, in front of diners are four rows of wooden tables and chairs. The hollow chair backs are also made of bamboo strips. The four rows of table sets are separated in the middle by large potted plants, Bird of Paradise and areca palms. Right above the sets, there are pendant lamps, the shades of which are also woven from bamboo strips, in the shape of the Dai people's bamboo hats. Looking above the lamps, one can see that the ceiling is covered with dried palm tree leaves. In Xishuangbanna, various palm trees are cultivated in the yards of the Buddhist temples in service of Buddhist rituals, thus also as temple yard plants (Pei, 1985).

What also draw diners' attention are the wall paintings on both the left and right walls, a pair of gigantic blue-grey butterfly wings on the left wall next to the door and a full wall of various Dai cultural elements on the right (see Image 6.4). These wall paintings remind me of *the Dai Show (傣秀): Xishuangbanna in China* created by Franco Dragoneto to showcase that the Dai people still live in harmony with nature[34]. The show is about a young man who is pushed into a jungle where exotic and fantastic creatures with unexpected capacities live. In this world of lush forests, the young man sees how this world is both beautiful and fragile at the same time, such as the giant butterflies and the flower girls. The secret and harmonious link between people and nature is also what DJL tries to present to the diners through food, art, objects, and the space.

Image 6.4 Wall paintings

The right wall is an assemblage of the Dai culture fusing ethnic and ecological attributes, with an undertone of a people-nature harmony underpinned by religious beliefs. In the middle of the wall is an image of a Dai woman in traditional Dai sarong dress, with white frangipani flowers on her hair, which are often used as hair accessories by the Dai women. Furthermore, frangipani is commonly planted in the Buddhist temple yards in Xishuangbanna, serving as an ornamental plant (Pei, 1985). The woman's hair is styled into a bun, a traditional Dai hairstyle. She is performing a namaste, a greeting gesture. It is a Buddhist way of greeting which means "the sacred in me recognizes the sacred in you" and is therefore seen as a sign of genuine respect and good will (Oxhandler, 2017). Surrounding the image of the woman are images of various ingredients including a shrimp, a pineapple, a honey melon, lemons, and carrots. Among them are images of bamboo utensils and a big wooden mortar and pestle, which are important cooking utensils for the Dai cuisine. Right under the image of the Dai woman is an image of a Buddhist temple in copper green and gold.

On the left of the wall, a peacock with a long and beautiful tail is painted (see Image 6.5). The peacock image is surrounded by a bunch of colourful flowering and lush plants. Between the woman and the peacock is an image of a fruiting banana tree. On the right side of the wall, there are images of a mother Asian elephant with its baby. They are surrounded by large and bright flowering plants and other green plants. Right beside the elephants, a big bird is resting on a plant. In brief, the wall paintings on both walls at

DJL present the diners a (sub)tropical and ethnic landscapes in Xishuangbanna and aim to immerse them in such a vibe. To sum up, the exterior and interior designs of DJL showcase the Dai culture and traditions, which pay attention to detail and the artistry of decoration by drawing upon a wide variety of cultural and natural resources.

Image 6.5 the creating of the wall paintings

It is for sure that the grand finale of the art show held at DJL is food. For the Dai cuisine, bamboos and banana leaves are often used as plates, containers, and tablecloths. In addition, common ingredients include glutinous rice, vegetables (e.g. water spinach, fiddleheads, bamboo shoots, wild vegetables), herbs (e.g. lemongrass, Burmese corianders, perilla leaves, mint), tropical fruit (e.g. mangoes, pineapples, limes, passionfruit, papayas, coconuts), livestock products (e.g. meat, skins, offal, bovine bile), and insects (e.g. bamboo worms, grasshoppers, baby bees), along with different dipping sauces (see Image 6.6). With these ingredients, the Dai foods are well-known for their sour, spicy, bitter, and refreshing flavours. What especially stands out is the spicy-sour dipping sauce (i.e. *nanmi* 喃咪 in Dai language), usually made from charred tomatoes, chillis, garlic, and various herbs. It is seen as a hallmark of the Dai flavour, with a touch of Southeast Asian charm (Luo, 2023). That said, when being relocated in the non-Dai regions, to cater for the local people's taste preferences, these features have been accordingly lessened.

Image 6.6 Dai dishes

(left to right: deep-fried prawn crackers with dipping sauce; Dai spicy chicken feet with herbs and vegetables; deep-fried fish with raw vegetables, rice noodles, and dipping sauce; sweet bamboo shoot and chicken soup; steamed coloured glutinous rice with mango slices and coconut milk; deep-fried insects and nuts)

The practices to downplay the "authenticity" of the Dai foods and cuisine provoke different reactions from the diners. According to Mkono (2013), the authentication endeavours to increase ethnic minority foodservice experiences are *negotiated authenticity strategies*, which aim at "both genuineness and continuity, and an effort to modify settings to make profit" (in Chhabra, et al., 2013:365). They are "an effort to adapt food heritage to the mainstream population while at the same time striving to retain some aspects of objective authenticity and communicating ethnic traditions to their audience" (Chhabra et al., 2013:366). *Objective authenticity* manifests in terms like genuine, original, pristine, and real to denote cultural continuity (Chhabra, et al., 2013; Wang, 1999). That means, in socially constructed and negotiated settings like restaurants, authenticity cannot be judged by any absolute criterion (e.g. Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999; Muñoz & Wood, 2009). Instead, it is situated, negotiable, fluid, variable, and controversial — both subjective and objective (see also 3.3.3).

Moreover, as the restaurant name suggests, DJL is a fusion restaurant (see 6.2.2.3). That is why other ethnic cuisines common in Yunnan, such as Yi, Naxi, Jingpo foods, can be found at DJL. It is also worth noting that Yunnan's proximity to Southeast Asia and the kindships between some ethnic minority groups in Yunnan and those in Southeast Asian countries (see 4.4.1) make it possible for Southeast Asian foods find their way into DJL, such as coconut milk and sparkling water from Thailand and prawn crackers made of Thailand rice.

In sum, DJL is a socially constructed space consisting of various semiotic assemblages, including the exterior and interior decors, the wall paintings, and ethnic foods and their presentation. These semiotic assemblages mobilize a wide variety of cultural and natural resources and signs in relation to the Dai community in Xishuangbanna, to authenticate the restaurant. In addition, within the assemblages, some semiotic resources and signs are recreated (e.g. the Dai script, the blue-grey butterfly wings, the recontextualized ethnic foods) in order to adapt to the local context. The following section shows how various semiotic resources and signs as Dai cultural markers are (re)made and (re)assembled through multi-semiotic practices.

6.2.2 Restaurant design with semiotic resources and through semiotic practices

In social semiotics, the term *design* indicates three embedded dimensions in sign (re)making: social practice, actors, and social structure (Kress, 2010). As for sign-designing, the designing practice projects and (re)configures semiotic assemblages, which involves multiple semiotic resources and their realized modes (i.e. signs); the term design also indicates a designer, along with his/her lived experience, understanding and knowledges of the affordances of all semiotic resources involved and of the sociopolitical conditions; and more importantly, the possibility of design relies on its accordance with the social context, in which signs and semiotic assemblages are produced and meanwhile subject to and hence can make meaning and sense (ibid., pp.133-138). To illustrate, the following sections unpack how the three dimensions play out and are intertwined in the making of DJL, during which various cultural and natural resources and signs as ethnic markers are mobilized and (re)made.

6.2.2.1 Design of the restaurant logo

Cultural experiences involving ethnic foods and dining environments play a significant role in shaping a consumer's perception of the authenticity of an ethnically themed restaurant (Muñoz & Wood, 2009; Jiang & Ha, 2015). As the first impression of a dining experience, a dining environment, inculding interior and exterior design, amibience, furniture, and cultural artefacts, largely contributes to consumers' perceived authenticity and helps to meet their cultural expectations (Muñoz & Wood, 2009). DJL also aims to impress its customers with its ethnic design featuring the Dai culture. In the following extract, Xuan, one of the restauratuers and the prominent interior and exterior designer of DJL, explained her intentions with respect to the decors and decoration of DJL.

At a Microsoft Teams meeting, November 14th, 2023, Present: Xuan and Chun.

Extract 1 Ethnicity with a touch of exoticism

> **Chun:** 你说的非常有特色，这个特色指的是他们（顾客）进到餐厅以后会觉得这是一家傣族餐厅这样吗？
> Um, you mentioned it's very distinctive. Does it mean once the customers enter the restaurant they can tell it's a Dai restaurant?
> **Xuan:** [他们觉得这]是一个比较有文化特色的餐厅吧，从装饰啊环境啊，呃。[...]对，比较异域风情，从装饰和我们的墙画上面都能看得出，就是比较具有民族特色的，就像，你看我们的背景墙是一个孔雀还有一个傣族的少女，大象这些都是比较标志性的一些绘画。[...]大家都知道，就是民族文化的呃风向标一样的东西吧。
> [They thought] it's a culturally themed restaurant, very special, including the decoration and the environment. [...] Right, kind of exotic, both the decorations and our wall paintings make people feel that way, full of ethnic features. For example, you see, in our wall paintings there are [images of] a peacock, a young Dai woman, and elephants, they are symbolic images [of the Dai culture]. [...] Everyone is familiar with them, and they're like a uh weathervane of [the Dai] ethnic culture.

The "exotic" ethnic vibe of DJL is specifically created through a variety of multi-semiotic practices. One of the most creative practices is the design of the restaurant logo. The

logo includes an image of a simplified triangle-shaped structure resembling a Theravada Buddhist temple, with the Dai script of the restaurant name on the bottom floor of the temple and the Chinese script of the restaurant name right below the image. The font of the Chinese characters is SimHei (*heiti* 黑体), a Chinese font type which features square and modern-looking strokes with no serifs. This may explain why the three characters lining horizontally under the image of the Buddhist temple seem to form another floor of the temple, especially when seen at a distance. The logo is in monochrome gold. According to Xuan, the use of gold color is to remind customers of the popular tourist attraction in Xishuangbanna — the Great Pagoda Temple of Jinghong (景洪市大金塔寺 *Jinghongshi dajintasi*), featuring its dominantly gold color.

The gold/yellowish colour, for the Buddhist believers in Xishuangbanna (e.g. the Dai and the Blang), connotates both cultural and religious meanings. In terms of Theravada Buddhism, light gold is the color of the Bodhi tree flowers in full blossom. Bodhi trees (*putishu* 菩提树, sacred fig) are sacred trees for Buddhists because people believe that Buddha received his enlightenment under it[35]. Therefore, in Buddhist tradition, gold symbolizes vitality and energy (Zhang, 2018). In addition, the Dai and Blang believers may donate gold and silver to temples, which denote nobility and wealth for them, in order to pray for prosperity and happiness in their next life (ibid.). As for its cultural meanings, gold/yellow manifests the Dai people's deep-seated belief in the man-nature harmony. For one thing, the main corps in Xishuangbanna including paddy rice, bananas, mangoes, etc. turn yellow when they are ripe. Even the soil for them to grow is brownish yellow. In China, brownish-yellow soil (*huangtudi* 黄土地) is associated with Mother Nature, from whom lives come (see Fei's argument about Chinese people from the rural in his book *Xiangtu Zhongguo* 《乡土中国》, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*, Fei et al., 1992). This deep-seated belief manifests as a proverb widely circulated in Xishuangbanna, that is, "the Forest is our Father and the Earth is our Mother". For these reasons, gold/yellow is believed to be the colour of harvest (Zhang, 2018). For another, closely related to the previous one, the use of gold/yellow also indicates the Dai people's respect for nature (ibid.).

The Dai script in the restaurant logo, which is the translation of the Chinese name of the restaurant, was actually translated by a Dai man living in Xishuangbanna. Although DJL is a Dai culture themed restaurant, none of the people working there is Dai. Even though

the restaurant cook had worked in Xishuangbanna for more than a decade, he could not speak the Dai language nor understand the Dai script. It is not unusual. For example, another participant Huan (a Han) has been living and working in Xishuangbanna for over two decades, but she can only understand some daily greetings of the Dai language. The reason is that, with the booming tourism and the increasing number of Han migrants (Huan belongs to this group) in Xishuangbanna, *Putonghua* and local Chinese dialect have long been the local lingua franca. Moreover, it is almost impossible to get access to learning the Dai script systematically, because only Dai males are allowed to learn it while practicing Buddhism in a temple.

According to the Dai tradition, Dai boys should practice Buddhism for a period in the village temple where they live. This religious practice is believed to win merit for the Dai boys' family and elevate the boys' social status (Facts and Details, n.d.)[36]. During their study in the temple, the Dai boys are called *small/junior monks* (*xiaoheshang* 小和尚), and they learn Buddhist scriptures in the Dai script, Buddhist practices, and the Dai culture and rituals (Qu, 2013; Zhang, 2024). The participant Yuan is a Dai, and he was a small monk when he was a pupil. According to the national compulsory education law and the local government regulations, he should still attend school when practicing Buddhism in the temple. He recalled that he had to get up at 5 every morning to practice, which was too much for him. That is why his study in the temple only lasted for three months, which is the shortest practice time required. In addition, as a small monk, he had to get his head shaven completely bald and wear Kasaya (robs for fully ordained Buddhist monks) all the time. Even though these practices were quite common in that area, Yuan still drew a lot of attention in school while being a small monk.

That said, this learning experience in the temple has helped Yuan to learn the Dai script, rituals, history, and custom, thus understanding and appreciating his culture and identity much better. Yet, due to his short-term study in the temple and the increasing non-Dai-script language environment even in the Dai villages, he cannot understand the Dai script anymore. It is worth mentioning that both Yuan and Huan have mentioned that nowadays Dai boys still practice Buddhism in the village, but there are much fewer young people who can read and write the Dai script, mainly owing to the lack of an environment of using the language.

This explains why Xuan had to hire a Dai male in Xishuangbanna to translate the restaurant name. It also explains why the Dai script functions differently at the restaurant. That is, for those who can understand the Dai script, this script in the logo is symbolic signs based on conventional rules (see 5.4.2.1). However, given that few people understand the language especially in the urban area where the restaurant is located, the Dai script is resemiotized and recontextualized. It mainly serves as iconic signs if the customers saw (not understood) the Dai script before, or as indexical signs which remind the customers (who can relate the Dai script to the Dai people) of the Dai people, their culture and/or habitat.

In sum, the design of the restaurant logo mobilizes various cultural and natural resources and ethnic signs and meanwhile relies on the designer's lived experience and knowledges of the Dai culture, coupled with a Dai insider's language repertoire which is afforded by the sociocultural systems in Xishuangbanna. Put simply, the ethnic vibe of the logo is achieved through the complicated interplay between social actors, semiotic resources and signs, and social structures. Another design at DJL that draws most customers' attention is the wall paintings, as the interview extract above shows, due to the diverse ethnic cultural and natural elements mobilized. For an insight, the following section explores how they were created through multi-semiotic practices and during the creation what semiotic resources were mobilized and for what purpose.

6.2.2.2 Wall painting creation

During the creation of a wall painting, one day, Xuan and Duan, standing on a scaffolding, were colouring a pair of 3-meter-tall butterfly wings on the wall right next to the doors (see Image 6.7). They coloured the wings in different shades of blue grey to echo the simplicity and modernity of the glass doors within the dark-grey metal frames. They agreed on a butterfly image in the first place, but they were actually inspired differently by their own life experiences. Duan fell in love with the Dai music and dancing when she was a child. In Xishuangbanna where she had visited quite often, as she recalled, the music featuring *Hulusi* (葫芦丝) (cucurbit flutes, a traditional musical instrument in the Dai communities) was always played in the public places. That is where she fell in love with the Dai music. Later, because of her love for the Dai music and dancing, she has found out that there is a butterfly dance popular in a Dai

community in Genma County, Yunnan. It is a unique *Tusi* (土司, chieftains) court prop dance, which is mainly circulated in that region. Comparatively, the other Dai communities in Yunnan are well-known for their peacock dance. As for Xuan, she was inspired by the tropical rainforest in Xishuangbanna and its abundant biodiversity, which she also has visited numerous times. One of the major features of the insect diversity in this rainforest is that there are 172 large-sized butterfly species, which are both colourful and beautiful (Pu & Zhang, 2001).

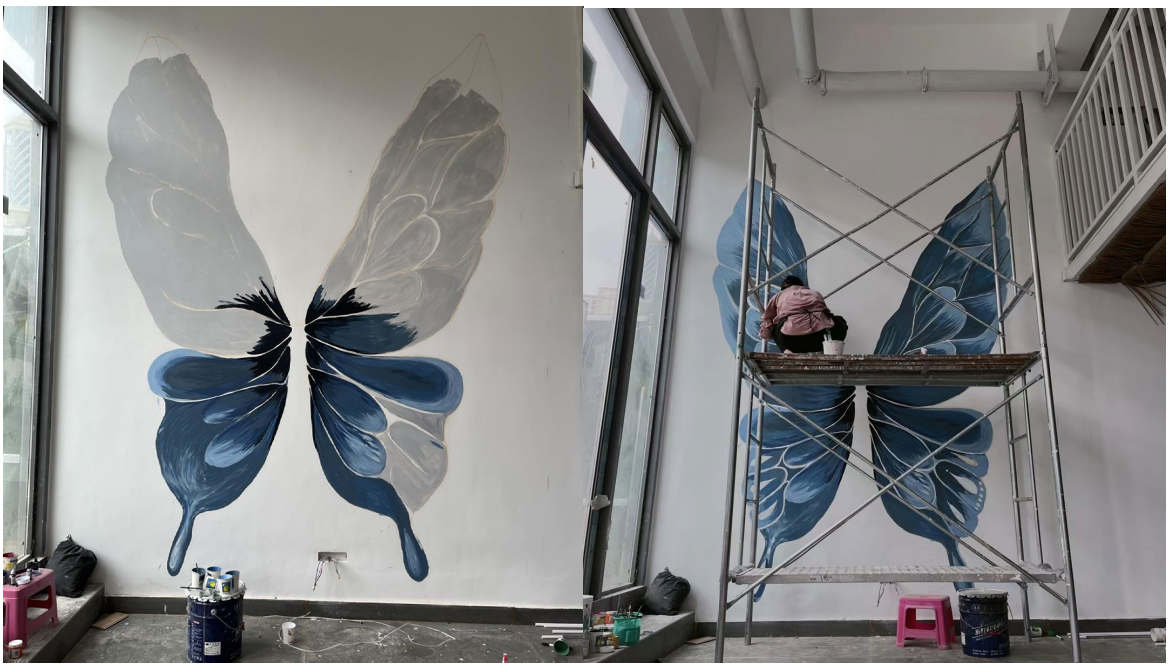

Image 6.7 the creating of a giant pair of butterfly wings

Despite their different inspirations, they have designed and created DJL and are its "reality engineers" (Wood & Muñoz, 2007). That is, their production of the themed environment, according to Wood and Muñoz (2007), relies on their acute awareness of "how a particular ethnic culture is presented in the media and what symbolic motifs best depict and match consumers' cultural expectations" (p.244). Gottdiener and Lagopoulos (1986) further elaborate that "most of the ways in which people perceive space are socially learned and experientially based, which is fundamentally an ideological product" (p.11). What stands out in the making of an ideology-generated space is individuals' knowledges and lived experience, or *subjugated knowledges* (see 4.3.2). Subjugated knowledges matter, "not because they represent more accurate representation of the Real as it exists in itself [...but because] they have a different relationship to power, and [...] this different relationship will constitute a different field

[of knowledge]" (Alcoff, 2008:155, in Lončarević, 2013:78). Viewed in this light, the design of the butterfly wing image to fit into DJL is a case of creating an ideology-based product. It not only relies on the creators' lived experience and their assessment of the sociocultural context where the designed image can make meaning and sense but also materializes the circulated discourses in that context (see 7.3.2 for further discussion).

At a Microsoft Teams meeting, December 6th, 2023, Present: Xuan and Chun.

Extract 2 Butterflies can remind people of the tropic rain forest in Xishuangbanna.

Chun: 想到孔雀我们可能想到就是呃傣族，还有大象，那蝴蝶是否和少数民族有直接关联或者相关的一些图腾？

For example, peacocks remind people of the Dai people, as well as elephants. Is there any ethic minority group relevant to butterflies or using butterflies as their totem?

Xuan: 在民族里边，比如说像白族就有个蝴蝶泉嘛，而且他们的这个蝴蝶会呈现在他们的着装上。

Among the minority groups, such as the Bai people, there is a Butterfly Spring [in their community], and the symbols of butterflies are embedded in their clothing.

Chun: 那你们当时选择这个蝴蝶的形象，是因为联想到它跟白族有关吗？还是像刚才你说的更多是为了美观的一个效果？

So when you created the image of the butterfly wings, did you think about the Bai people? Or as you just said, you created it mainly for decoration.

Xuan: 看到蝴蝶也会想到[西双版纳的]热带雨林嘛，比如说几月份是蝴蝶的繁殖期，那它在热带雨林也是一个比较独特的风景吧？

Butterflies can also remind people of the tropic rain forest [in Xishuangbanna]. For example, during certain period, it's the breeding season for butterflies, which is a unique scene in the forest.

Chun: 嗯，所以其实还是会有想到这个元素其实和少数民族还有地理环境有关，对吗？

That means, this image is closely related to ethnic minority groups and their geographic surroundings, right?

Xuan: 对的。

That's correct.

Notably, the gigantic size and the unique color of the wing image also showcase the designers' "capacity to shape their interests through the design of messages with the resources available to them in specific situations" (Kress, 2010:23). In this case, the creatively designed image becomes a hot photography spot at DJL and brings it economic profits (see 6.3.1).

Similarly, the design of the other wall painting at DJL also relies on the designers' assessment and knowledges of the sociocultural context. During their creation, Xuan and Duan discussed what images were suitable for filling in the blank space in the middle of the jungle scene. Duan proposed to foreground the Dai people, but Xuan suggested that the images should remind the diners of the title of Yunnan as the Kingdom of Plants and Animals (*China Daily*, 2024)[37]. For this reason, images of natural ingredient and bamboo and wooden utensils, coupled with the images of a Dai woman and a Buddhist temple, were assembled and painted (see Image 6.8). The images not only create an immersive dining experience but also are more fit for a Dai culture themed restaurant, especially given the Dai people's belief in the harmony between man and nature. Actually, Xuan's proposal echoes Sims' (2009) argument, who points out that "foodservice experiences have the potential to intimately engage and submerse consumers into various cultural, spiritual, and spatial and temporal places" (p.323, in Chhabra, et al. 2013:362). DJL is such a space created with pot plants, flora-and-fauna and ethnically themed wall paintings, bamboo decorations, etc. to remind the diners of the rainforest in Xishuangbanna and provide them an immersive dining experience.

Image 6.8 the designing of an assemblage of the Dai cultural markers

To sum up, the wall paintings are materialization of the social actors' perceptions and knowledges attributed to their lived experiences and awareness of the social context where they engage in their everyday life. Albeit being subjugate, the microlevel awareness and knowledges are constituents of ideologies at the meso- and macro levels (e.g. van Dijk, 1993, 2015). As such, the wall paintings can be seen as ideological products (see also 7.3 and 7.4). It is for sure that at DJL the highlight of foodservice experiences lies in food per se, which is elaborated in 6.2.2.3.

6.2.2.3 Ethnic foods

Ethnic foods, as another contributor to a consumer's perceived authenticity regarding an ethnically themed restaurant, are symbolic carriers of ethnic culture and tradition, including ingredients produced and recipes shared by the claimed ethnic group, food presentation, methods of cooking, and taste (Muñoz & Wood, 2009; Jiang & Ha, 2015). Chhabra et al. (2013) also contend that food per se is a significant mechanism because it serves "to transport sense of place and cultural identity and therefore act as a dynamic symbol of 'negotiated otherness'" (p.362). Yunnan is populated by multi-ethnic groups, and unsurprisingly the ethnic diversity also manifests in the local foodways. The foods served at DJL showcase the multi-ethnic features.

During my first interview with Xuan, she told me that DJL was not only a Dai culture themed restaurant but also a fusion restaurant. According to Stano (2017), *fusion cuisine* refers to a cooking style that combines ingredients and techniques from different *foodspheres* — "the inherently cultural and semiotic nature of the food system" (p.913) — or culinary cultures (p.904). The prominent feature characterizing fusion cuisine derives from the word *fusion* (from Latin word *fusus*, "to pour, to melt"), that is, "a harmonious combination of different culinary traditions in order to create innovative and seamless dishes", thus manifesting as an expression of cultural identity (ibid., p.910). When it comes to ethnic fusion restaurants, Liu et al. (2020) have identified two fusion types, namely, creative-mix and variety-mix fusion. A creative-mix fusion indicates the concept of "*culture fusion* where different cultures are fused together to create a new independent entity"; while a variety-mix fusion indicates the notion of "*culture co-presentation* where different cultures remain as separate entities and are mingled together without being pressed into one" (p.1, originally emphasized). Note that the concepts of culture fusion and culture co-presentation actually resonate with Postiglione's (2008, 2013) *harmonious multiculturism* and *plural monoculturalism* regarding ethnic diversity management in China (see 2.4).

In the case of DJL, to maintain certain "authentic" Dai and other ethnic flavours for marketing and meanwhile cater for the local diners for commercial purposes, both fusion types are practiced (see below). In other words, due to the dual and oftentimes competing roles of authenticity as both symbolic and economic capital in *ethno-economy* — "the origin and the social form of the local economic structure and culture in the territory inhabited by an ethnic group" (Ovchinnikov & Kolesnikov, 2006:79) — (see Heller et al., 2014a; Heller et al. 2014b), the tensions between authentication through and commodification of ethnic semiotic resources and signs play out in the culture fusion and culture co-presentation practices — sometimes simultaneously — at DJL.

Actually, I did not notice DJL being a fusion restaurant at the beginning, so Xuan explained to me how the fusion dimension embedded in the restaurant name.

At a Microsoft Teams meeting, November 14th, 2023, Present: Xuan and Chun.

Extract 3 DJL as a fusion restaurant

> **Xuan:** DJL，傣(D)是傣族的傣，J 是 JD 的 J，然后也包含了思茅菜[普洱旧称]，澜(L)是澜沧江，就叫，取名为 DJL。嗯，因为澜沧江相当于我们九县一区的母亲河了嘛，对吧？所以以澜沧江的澜也入了一个名。因为澜沧江里边它也包含有江鱼嘛，澜沧江里的江鱼也是一道美食。嗯，对，融合餐厅嘛就是傣味，JD 味，思茅味都有。
>
> DJL, "D" means the Dai ethnic group; "J" represents JD [Xuan's hometown, an ethnic minority autonomous county in Pu'er city], and it also involves Simao [the old name of Pu'er city] cuisine; "L" indicates Lancang River. Um, because Lancang River is the mother river of the nine counties and one district [of Pu'er City], right? So we add the word of "L" to the restaurant name. There are fishes in Lancang River, and a dish made with the fish from it is also well-known. Um, right, it's a fusion restaurant, including the Dai cuisine, JD cuisine, and Simao cuisine.

The city of Pu'er, located in the southwest of Yunnan, includes one district and nine ethnic minority autonomous counties with 13 minority groups living there, such as Hani, Yi, Lahu, Wa, Dai, Blang, Hui, Bai, Yao, Lisu, Miao, Mongolia, and Jingpo. The population of the minority groups accounts for 61.2% (1.4504 million) of the total population. It is adjacent and the gateway to Xishuangbanna in the south and shares borders with Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar (Nomoto & Yokoyama, 2020; Yunnan Yearbook 2023[38]). Located in a subtropical region featuring a monsoon climate and with the Lancang-Mekong River running through its terrain, Pu'er is renowned for its ecologically diverse environment and natural products, especially known for its teas as both a natural and ethnicized product (Cao et al., 2020; Han, 2022). In short, the ethnic cultural and ecological diversities have enriched the food culture in Pu'er, which also shares similarities with that of its adjacent neighbour Xishuangbanna.

When the concept of fusion is translated into practices at DJL, it manifests in the way that food is cooked and presented in the kitchen. In a late morning, the ingredients including rice noodles, roasted ox livers, pickled bamboo shoot, various herbs (e.g. lemongrass, Vietnamese coriander) were finally delivered to the kitchen of DJL from Xishuangbanna. The cook, who is a Han but has a-decade-long experience of working in Xishuangbanna as a cook, started working. In the large electric steamer, two trays of soaked glutinous rice coloured into purple and yellow with butterfly pea flowers and

pale butterfly bush flowers were in the middle layer, while the top and bottom ones were layered with sweet corn paste wrapped by neatly-cut fresh corn husks (see Image 6.9). Glutinous rice is staple food for the Dai people, while steamed corn cakes are traditional food in Xuan's hometown, which is an Yi autonomous county.

Image 6.9 the cooking and presenting of ethnic foods

Near the steamer, the cook deep fried a whole fish. On the large table in the middle of the kitchen, a plate-sized bamboo container, layered with fresh banana leaves, was ready for presenting the fried fish. Next to the bamboo container were raw lettuce leaves and onion slices, along with a bowl of dipping sauce. On another stove near the one being used by the cook, there was a large pot with a steel lid. The cook stewed some cured pork ribs while deep frying the fish. Cured pork ribs are a Naxi special. The waitress working at DJL is a member of the Naxi. On the far end of the cooking area, a whole chicken was cleaned, which was ready to make 景颇鬼鸡(*Jingpo guiji*, literally Jingpo Ghost Chicken), a specialty of the Jingpo who is an ethnic minority group in Xishuangbanna and Pu'er.

Comparatively, about five hundred kilometres away from DJL, in a kitchen of a Dai family in Xishuangbanna, early in the morning, a woman steamed soaked plain glutinous rice which was on a bamboo tray. According to the Dai traditions, it is usually women who cook in their family. The steamer with a bamboo lid was in a cast-iron wok with some

water which was over an open fire. In the steamer, there were also some air-dried pork and beef, which were typical side dishes for steamed glutinous rice. For the Dai people, steaming is the most common way of cooking, which is believed to be the best to maintain the original flavour and nutritional value of ingredients (Qin & Jin, 2023). Some fresh banana leaves were ready on the table as containers for the steamed rice and a medium-sized container made of bamboo strips. Next to the leaves was another side dish, an eggplant dipping sauce — a mixture of charred and then smashed eggplants and tomatoes with various herbs.

In sum, it is clear that when the traditional culinary practices in Xishuangbanna, along with some local ingredients, are relocated at DJL, some traditions are maintained for authenticity (e.g. the way of steaming, the use of banana leaves and bamboo containers, various dipping sauces) but meanwhile they are also localized to fit into the local context (e.g. the use of an electronic steamer and steel cookers instead of open fire and bamboo/wooden cookers, deep-frying instead of roasting fish). Moreover, at the kitchen of DJL, various ethnic dishes are assembled and localized, as well as being reinterpreted and recreated by the Han cook, which involves both culture fusion and co-presentation. Briefly, individuals' practices and mobilized resources and signs in the restaurant design and cooking carry discernible sociocultural values and also accord with social-contextual changes. Douglas (1972), through an analysis of various food cultures worldwide, has already made a case that every meal is constructed based on certain rules, which trace its social and cultural roots. Echoing Douglas (1972), among others, to understand the dynamic complexity involving sociocultural origins, individual and regional identification, and geographic and political-economic factors in relation to the Dai cuisine, Chapter 7 traces and explores how these dimensions intertwine and play out at DJL.

6.2.2.4 Summary

This section has demonstrated how DJL is designed or still being made through multi-semiotic practices, such as designing the restaurant logo, creating wall paintings, and cooking and presenting food. It has found that these constructed semiotic assemblages and multi-semiotic practices conducted at DJL mobilise cultural and natural resources available in Yunnan, and that they are afforded and sometimes constrained by the

social contexts and changes. Put differently, the multi-semiotic assemblages and practices are spatial-temporally oriented, and they are actualized by the entanglement of social actors' lived experiences and perceptions as well as the semiotic ideologies prevalent in the context where they engage.

6.2.3 Conclusion

This section ethnographically depicts DJL as semiotic assemblages and elaborates on the design of the restaurant through multi-semiotic practices mobilizing diverse cultural and natural resources. I have identified that both the assemblages and the making of the restaurant mobilise various cultural and natural resources to represent the Dai community, and therefore I argue that the design and making of the restaurant at the microlevel embodies the semiotic ideologies and sociocultural values prevailing in that social context. How exactly the microlevel practices and perceptions, especially regarding various semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers, are intertwined with the provincial practices and certain ideologies is explored in 6.3.

6.3 Resemiotization and (re)assemblage of resources and signs representing the Dai culture

The (re)construction of cultural elements and practices is very much akin to *resemiotizion* process (Iedema, 2001, 2003) supplemented by the idea of *semiotic (re)assemblage* (e.g. Otsuji & Pennycook, 2023; Pennycook, 2017b) (see 4.2.1). In brief, resemiotization is a transformative process in which existing signs and symbols acquire new meanings, oftentimes mobilized by social changes and shifting cultural contexts (Iedema, 2003). The notion of semiotic (re)assemblage enables to explore how these resources and signs assemble and reassemble at different stages in resemiotization processes (Otsuji & Pennycook, 2023). That means, with the analytical concepts of resemiotization and (re)assemblage, I can examine how some semiosis practices "harbour a general accessibility and negotiability [...] while others require and embody considerable investments of resources [...] and mobilize radically different spheres of human experience" (Iedema, 2003:48-49). Meanwhile, these concepts allow me to

unpack how people, objects, social space, and other semiotic resources and signs are brought together at a certain time (i.e. an assembling process) and then resemble into a different configuration.

To examine the resemiotization and (re)assemblage processes of semiotic resources and signs, or in other words, the transformation of meaning, it is essential to understand what meaning is created and attached to a particular semiotic resource or sign and then trace how meaning is used, maintained, and changed/transformed in these processes. As elaborated in 5.4.2.1, Peirce's categorization of signs — indexicality, iconicity, and symbolicity — can serve the purpose. To illustrate, sections 6.3.1 and 6.3.2 show how semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers are resemiotized through multi-semiotic and recontextualizing practices at DJL, and what semiotic assemblages and reassemblages emerge in the process to represent the Dai culture.

6.3.1 Resemiotization through multi-semiotic and recontextualizing practices

At DJL, the most unique and creative design is the restaurant logo, which mobilizes and resemiotizes various semiotic resources and signs and engages different social actors in its design (see 6.2.2.1). The logo can be seen almost everywhere at DJL, such as above the front gate as signage, and on the menus, the dinner sets, and the leaflets. It is a simplified Buddhist temple image, with the Dai script of the restaurant name at the bottom floor of the temple, coupled with the Chinese characters of the restaurant name and sometimes also its *pinyin*, all in the color gold (see the religious and cultural meanings of the color gold/yellow for the Dai people in 6.2.2.1). In the process of designing and making the logo, various semiotic resources and the lived experiences or "subjugated knowledges" of the people involved, are recontextualized/transported and trans-semiotized/transformed. Before analysing these elements and their interconnection, a brief review of the three Peircean signs may be necessary. Briefly, an iconic sign resembles what it was created to represent, an indexical sign has a factual, spatiotemporal, or causal link with what it was made to represent, and a symbolic sign is conventionally and culturally created to represent something else (see 5.4.2.1).

In the logo, the golden Buddhist temple (an image) is resemiotized/transformed from the Great Pagoda Temple of Jinghong (景洪市大金塔寺) (an architecture) in

Xishuangbanna, which also involves its being recontextualized from Xishuangbanna to DJL in the capital city of Yunnan. Moreover, what makes this resemiotization possible is the designer's (Xuan's) previous visits to Xishuangbanna and her knowledges of the landmarks there as well as the connection between the Dai people and Buddhism. As for the Dai script (a symbolic sign), it is only recontextualized for the viewers who understand the language, while it is also resemiotized into an image — an iconic sign — for the viewers who do not understand the Dai script; or resemiotized into an indexical sign for the viewers who do not understand the language but have seen it somewhere and know it is the language of the Dai people. Furthermore, in this case, the Dai translator's (a Dai male) previous study in a local Buddhist temple (see 6.2.2.1) and his linguistic repertoire (including oral and written Chinese, the Dai script) — symbolic signs are also materialized in the making of the logo. In sum, the meaning which the logo makes varies depending on viewers and their previous knowledge and lived experience in relation to the Dai culture.

For sure, one of the largest resemiotization projects carried out at DJL is the making of the wall paintings (see Image 6.4). The image of the gigantic butterfly wings on the left wall is resemiotized from a real butterfly or an imagined one in the creators' mind. As discussed in 6.2.2.2, the creation of this image was inspired by the two creators' different lived experiences. For Xuan (the restaurateur), it is from her visit to the Butterfly Garden in Xishuangbanna, while for Duan (the wall painting co-creator), it is related to her knowledges of the butterfly dance in a Dai autonomous county in Yunnan. That means, for Xuan, the butterfly wing image is both an iconic sign of real butterflies and an indexical sign of Xishuangbanna where the Dai people inhabit. In this sense, the design of the image also involves real butterflies (a referent/object) being recontextualized from the rainforest in Xishuangbanna to DJL. For Duan, the designed image is more of an indexical sign of the butterfly dance which is performed by the Dai people. Notably, there is no doubt that Duan, as well as most customers dining at DJL, has encountered real butterflies in their life. Yet, without the pre-existing knowledges of the connection between butterflies (real or represented) and the Dai people, the image on the wall is only a beautiful image for photographing (which is the case for many customers, see Image 6.10) instead of a marker of the Dai culture, which was created to authenticate DJL in the first place. Viewed from this light, it explains why different consumers have

different perceptions of the authenticity of DJL regarding its interior décor[9]. Peirce insightfully observed that iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs are not mutually exclusive and the perception of them depends on the viewers' previous knowledges and lived experience and thus varies (in Grayson & Martinec, 2004).

Image 6.10 a hot photography spot at DJL

Compared with the wall with the butterfly image, the images on its opposite wall are more recognizable symbols of the Dai culture (see 6.2.1). For example, the image of the young Dai woman wearing a traditional sarong in the center of the painting is resemiotized/translated from the creators' perception that women are more representative of the ethnic minority groups. During a focus group interview, the two wall painting creators told me why they chose a female Dai image.

A Microsoft Teams meeting, June 27th, 2024, Present: Duan, Xuan, and Chun.

Extract 4 Feminized representative of the Dai people

> **Duan:** 因为从服饰来说，还有我们给大众的一个视觉审美来说的话，肯定是放一个漂亮的少女在里面会感觉好一点，而且我们旁边还有一些孔雀之类的，所以[少

[9] This information was collected from my interviews with the participants. I am grateful that they shared their family members' and friends' comments on dining at DJL with me during the interviews.

女]跟孔雀来做个呼应。在这些元素组合在一起的话就会更和谐。假如是要放一个男生的话，有可能我们会考虑骑在大象上面，这种又更加和谐。

In terms of clothing and the visual aesthetics we present to the public, it's definitely better to put [the image of] a pretty lady in there. And there is [an image of] a peacock next to her. The image of the lady echoes that of the peacock. The combination of these elements is more in harmony. If we drew a Dai male, it's possible we would consider him riding on an elephant, which would again be more harmonious.

Xuan: 不管是哪个民族在宣传的时候都是以女性为主吧，因为不管是从发式也好，她的服饰也好，嗯，女性的服装相对来说颜色呀，各方面搭配也会更绚丽多彩一点，而且装饰性也比较强一些，包括女性的这个，呃身体的线条呀，轮廓呀都要比男的要更凸显很多。[我]是指审美。

Any ethnic group promotes their culture through the image of females, because not only their hairstyle but also their clothing, well, women's clothing is relatively more colourful and more decorative. Even their figures ah, their body shapes are more noticeable. I mean in terms of aesthetics.

These perceptions are widely shared not only in Xishuangbanna (see an ethnographic study of feminized representations of the Dai culture in Xishuangbanna by Komlosy, 2002) but also within and beyond Yunnan through such as the circulation of relevant media discourses. For example, on the official website of the State Council Information Office of the PRC, there is a webpage named as *China's Factbook* [39], which includes brief introductions of all 55 ethnic minority groups in China. All the introduction articles with a separate webpage are illustrated with a photo of the ethnic minority group. Among the fifty-five photos, only two of them are of males, a few of both females and males, and the rest of females. For instance, the page introducing the Dai people is illustrated with a photo of a group of young Dai females in colourful sarongs celebrating the traditional Water Sprinkling festival[40]. Similarly, one article published by *China Daily*, also titled "Dai Ethnic Group", is illustrated with just one photo with the caption "Dai people are dancing"[41]. In the photo, a group of young women wearing traditional Dai sarongs in bright red and gold are performing a peacock dance.

With the public discourses widely circulated in China which position Dai females as the representative of the Dai community, the image of a Dai female at DJL serves both as an

iconic sign and an indexical sign. The iconicity relies on the images circulated in media, or it occurs when viewers have encountered any Dai females wearing sarongs in real life. The indexicality rests on the perceived knowledges — either from media or personal experiences — of females in traditional Dai sarongs representing the Dai people. That means, the image of the Dai woman is resemiotized/translated from various discourses, as well as individuals' perceptions and lived experiences. Kress (2010) insightfully elaborates that discourses available in a society, especially produced from and shaped by an institutional perspective, serve as meaning-resources for individuals within this society to make sense of the world (p.110). Viewed in this light, the designed images at DJL also serve as an authenticating strategy to meet customers' expectations for authentic Dai culture and food (see Beardsworth & Bryman, 1999; Muñoz & Wood, 2009; Wood & Muñoz, 2007).

What also stand out in this wall painting are the images of the diverse and vibrant plants and animals, which take up most space of the whole wall. These images are recontextualization and translation of the tropical rainforest flora and fauna in Xishuangbanna, as well as a materialized representation of the Dai people's belief in the harmonious coexistence between human and nature. This belief derives from the Dai people's polytheistic religion, which later has been supplanted by Theravada Buddhism but with certain polytheistic religious tradition maintained. The merger between Buddhism and polytheistic beliefs manifests in the Dai people's worship of Holly Hills (Henin & Flaherty, 1994; Pei, 1985; Zeng, 2023). For the Dai people, the Holly Hill is a naturally forested mountain in which the gods reside, as well as the spirits of revered chieftains after their departure from the world. Owing to this belief, all the plants and animals inhabiting the Holy Hills, as well as the land and water sources within these hills/mountains, are regarded as inviolable for the Dai people (Pei, 1985:332). For this reason, the forest vegetation within the Holy Hills is well protected and preserved by the Dai people for long, which has allowed the maintenance of a stable but internally dynamic ecological balance (Pei, 1985). Unsurprisingly, the wall painting creators (Xuan and Duan) who have visited Xishuangbanna for countless times, along with their awareness of Yunnan as Kingdom of Plants and Animals (widely circulated discourse, see Endnote 37), have designed tropical flora and fauna themed painting at DJL.

To sum up, as Nagel (1994) observes, cultural representations are always (re)constructed by the interplay between social agents and structure, both inside and

outside an ethnic community. As discussed above, the resemiotization process occurring at DJL mobilizes and assembles multilevel social spaces, various semiotic resources and signs, and also entrains and materializes individuals' perceptions and lived experiences and the local sociocultural systems. In this process, semiotic resources and signs are attached with new meanings or detached from their original meanings, or sometimes both, and meanwhile the boundaries among them become blurred and fluid. The following section explores how these resources and signs (re)assemble at a particular time and/or in a certain place during the resemiotization process.

6.3.2 Semiotic assemblage and reassemblage to represent the Dai culture

Semiotic assemblages, to recap, are entanglements of people, places, objects, and other semiotic resources at given moments, which enable to approach the complexity and dynamics of particular configurations of semiotic and extra-semiotic factors (see 4.2.1). The logo of DJL (see 6.2.1 and 6.3.1) is a semiotic assemblage, whose meaning changes when located at particular moments of time and space and drawn together with other semiotic resources. Specifically, when printed on different objects (e.g. the menus) or located in different place (e.g. above the front gate as signage), the logo is entangled with other semiotic resources and configured as different semiotic (re)assemblages (see Image 6.11). For instance, the restaurant signage above the front gate not only reassembles the elements of the restaurant logo to emphasize the Chinese characters but also assembles and combines with the exterior of the restaurant to attract potential customers. The reassemblage of the logo as restaurant signage, with the Chinese name of the restaurant on the right of, instead of beneath, the simplified temple image and every single Chinese character in the same size as the temple image, draws viewers' immediate attention to the characters instead of the temple image. For example, the participant Huan (a former tour guide in Xishuangbanna) mentioned that when she first saw the signage, she realized that DJL was a fusion restaurant. Huan and Xuan (the restaurant owner) come from the same county (an Yi autonomous county), so she can relate the word J to their hometown. As for the character L, for those who come from the same region (Pu'er city), it denotes Lancang River. That means, from her reading of these three Chinese characters, Huan

understands that DJL serves dishes including those of the Dai cuisine and also from the region where her hometown is located.

Image 6.11 the reassemblages of the logo of DJL

That said, DJL is still themed as a Dai restaurant. In order to foreground the Dai feature of the restaurant, the logo is right before the Chinese characters and is chorded by the first character 傣 (Dai). That means, the image and the character are reconfigured as a chord, of which the symbolic “tone” (the Chinese character; the Dai script for those understanding the language) complements the iconic (the temple image) and indexical “tone” (achieved by viewers’ preexisting knowledges of the Buddhist temple representing the Dai culture and of the Dai script as the language of the Dai people despite not understanding it).

Given that DJL is in a commercial building where the outerior of each store looks the same, the assemblage of the sign and the exterior of the restaurant play an important role in helping potential customers to identify DJL as a Dai-themed restaurant. To this end, a large potted Bird of Parasite is put right under the signage and between the two doors. It can serve as an indexical sign if viewers know Bird of Parasite is a tropical plant, but with it becoming a common houseplant, its role as a Dai cultural marker is largely weakened. That said, when contextualized at DJL, its evergreen foliage not only stands out against the grey and beige modern building but more importantly resembles and echoes the drawn banana leaves on the floor-standing chalkboard right in front of

the pot (see the right picture in Image 6.11). Note that the echoing effect in this assemblage happens only when the chalkboard is put in front of the potted plant and only in the case that lush green banana leaves are drawn on the chalkboard. It showcases the *ad hoc* nature of (re)assemblage, that is, people, objects, social space, and other semiotic resources are brought together at a particular moment (e.g. Pennycook, 2019, 2021, 2022a).

To add more Dai tint to this assemblage, two stone statues of Asian elephants as plant pots are put on both sides of the right door (see Image 6.12). They are both iconic and indexical signs to represent the Dai culture. Elephants, culturally and religiously, coupled with peacocks, are the sacred animals of the Buddha, thus symbolizing peace and auspiciousness for the Dai people. In reality, the Wild Elephant Valley is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Xishuangbanna within and beyond Yunnan. During 2020 and 2022, this place drew the whole nation's attention because of the news about a herd of wild Asian elephants trekking northward from their natural habitat in Xishuangbanna for months. The incident was circulated by the media across the nation for this whole time. This elephant herd finally was spotted entering the Wild Elephant Valley in 2022 (e.g. *China Daily*[42]). With the wide-circulated discourses nationwide, Asian elephants, in the case of Yunnan, are perpetually related to the Dai people and their habitat Xishuangbanna (see also 7.3.2 and 7.4.1).

Image 6.12 a pair of stone statues of Asian elephants as plant pots

The participant Yuan, a Dai, mentioned his own experiences regarding an *imagined* connection between the Dai and elephants by the outsiders of Yunnan. Yuan studied at a university outside Yunnan. In the first class at university, the whole class gave a brief self-introduction. After class, knowing that Yuan came from Yunnan and was a small monk for a while (see 6.2.2.1), the other students gathered around him and asked him whether he went to school by riding an elephant in his hometown. This imagined lifestyle of Yunnan people (not only of the Dai) is not new. Several of my acquaintances had similar experiences when they studied outside Yunnan. Yuan did not feel offended by his classmates. Instead, he said he could understand their curiosity, and more importantly he never felt being singled out because of his ethnic identity within and out of Yunnan.

At a Microsoft Teams meeting, January 15th, 2024, Present: Yuan and Chun.

Extract 5 I think it's kind of cool being a Dai.

> **Yuan:** 我会觉得是，嗯，有一种自己人生经历的比别人多一点那种感觉，可以说是觉得挺好吧，因为自己经历过的很多事情都挺有趣的，然后别人没有的话，觉得自己是傣族，好像还挺不错的那种感觉。
>
> I just think, er, I have experienced a little more than other people have. It's kind of great, because I have experienced many interesting things while others don't have similar experiences. [That's why] being a member of the Dai group, I think it's kind of cool.

In brief, the widely circulated public discourses and the perceived connection — imagined or not — between the Dai people and Asian elephants explain why the stone statues of elephants are added to the assemblage by the restauranteurs at DJL.

The interior of DJL is the most complicated assemblage of various Dai cultural markers and meanwhile a creatively designed reassemblage of these markers to *signify* — "a practice that *produces* meaning, that *makes things mean*" (Hall, 1997:24, originally emphasized) — the Dai culture. That said, both the assemblage and the innovative reconfiguration of the Dai cultural markers are a manifestation and materialization of the Dai people's deep-rooted belief in the harmonious human-nature coexistence. This belief mobilizes and remakes various existing semiotic resources and signs, including potted tropical plants (iconic signs and also indexical signs if viewers can relate the

plants to the rainforest in Xishuangbanna), various bamboo and palm objects (indexical signs if viewers know the connection between the Dai people and bamboos and palm trees, culturally or/and religiously), wall paintings of cultural and natural resources together with humans (both iconic and indexical signs), the materialized logo on different items (iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs), as well as the structure of the restaurant which bears some resemblance to the traditional Dai bamboo houses (see 6.2.1) (an iconic and indexical sign).

Despite the effort to authenticate DJL as a Dai culture themed restaurant, various Dai cultural markers are also localized and resemiotized to cater for the local customers in the capital city, resulting in other creative reassemblages. For example, the Dai script as a symbolic sign mainly for the Dai monks and males in Xishuangbanna is relocated at DJL and resemiotized as an iconic and indexical sign of the Dai culture (in the form of a component of the logo) for the customers, especially for those who do not understand the language. In addition, the traditional Dai cultural signs are configured with non-Dai semiotic resources (e.g. the modernized dinner table sets, the dark grey tiled floor, the grey marble plant pots) as well as the creators' lived experiences and aesthetic taste (e.g. the unusual grey-blue colour and gigantic size of the butterfly wing image, the bamboo-strip woven lamp shades which are uncommon in Xishuangbanna but resemble the Dai women's straw hats, the green-glass lamp shade upstairs to echo the green theme of DJL) (see Image 6.13). In sum, the reassemblages showcase a dual-track marketing strategy which is commonly adopted by ethnic-themed restaurants, that is, highlighting their ethnic authenticity and meanwhile catering to the local market (e.g. Long, 2004; Molz, 2004; Tuxun, 2022).

Image 6.13 non-Dai cultural elements at DJL

To conclude, the unpacking of the assemblages and reassemblages at DJL which are located in a certain space and/or at a particular moment demonstrates that the (re)construction of cultural representations is dynamic, situated, fluid, and even contingent. It engages a wide range of cultural and natural resources and social actors, under the influence of economic, political, and sociohistorical factors. How the extra-semiotic factors play out in the design of DJL and how the meaning created and attached to the signs, semiotic resources and (re)assemblages at DJL makes sense in the macro and meso-level social contexts is explored in Chapter 7.

6.3.3 Summary

By adopting the concepts of resemiotization and (re)assemblage, this section has shown how indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs and other cultural and natural semiotic resources are resemiotized to represent the Dai culture, when relocated and (re)configurated at DJL; meanwhile, how people, social space, natural materials, and other semiotic resources come together at a certain moment and/or in a given locale as an assemblage/reassemblage to authenticate the restaurant. Through attending to the design of the restaurant, this research has found that the various semiotic resources

and signs mobilized at DJL maintain certain ethnic meaning for authentication but meanwhile are altered and resemiotized when relocated and (re)assembled. Furthermore, it has also found that the multi-semiotic practices and the resemiotization process at DJL mobilize accessible cultural and natural resources and signs and involve various individuals' agency under the impact of the sociocultural system; and that the designed semiotic (re)assemblages also embody multiscale entanglements. As Kress (2010, 2011) concludes, the design, use, and remaking of semiotic resources and signs rely on a designer's knowledges and lived experience, as well as aligning with the sociocultural context in which the resemiotized signs and the designed semiotic (re)assemblages can make meaning and sense. To gain further insight into the entanglements, the following chapter, through CDA, traces and examines the multiscale interconnections in ethnicity (re)construction in Yunnan.

6.4 Discussion and conclusion

This chapter has ethnographically depicted what the Dai culture themed restaurant (DJL), viewed as assemblages of various semiotic resources and signs, looks like, and unpacked various indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs and other cultural and natural semiotic resources through a sociosemiotic lens. It has found that the resources and signs mobilized at DJL maintain certain ethnic and cultural meaning to authenticate the restaurant but meanwhile are altered and resemiotized when relocated and (re)assembled. Following that, this chapter has traced and analysed the resemiotization and (re)assemblage processes of the semiotic resources and signs at DJL to represent the Dai culture. The analyses of the multi-semiotic practices and the resemiotization process indicate that various semiotic resources and signs are mobilized and capitalized on during the mingled social practice and process activated by various social agents and afforded by the political-economic flow within and beyond the provincial territory. In the same vein, the ad hoc/designed (re)assemblages of ethnic markers at the restaurant come into being at a particular moment and/or in a given space as a result of the entangled and dynamic performance of various social forces and actors.

Based on these interpretations, this chapter argues that the resemiotization of semiotic resources and signs and the design of the (re)assemblages embody particular semiotic ideologies regarding the interconnections between culture, nature, and ethnicity in Yunnan. In this way, the resemiotized signs and the designed semiotic (re)assemblages can make meaning and sense in that context. In other words, social agency plays a significant role in the design, use, and remaking of semiotic resources and signs, but it also accords with the sociocultural system and power relations of that context. How the interplay between the micro-level practices and context and the meso- and macrolevel social forces playing out at the restaurant is further explored in Chapter 7.

Chapter 7 CDA of multiscale interactions regarding ethnic minorities

7.1 Introduction

The version of CDA elucidated in 5.4.2.2 serves specifically to trace and unpack the micro-meso-macro interplay through analysing the dynamics between discourses as social practices and extra-semiotic structure (e.g. Fairclough, 2001, 2013; Van Dijk, 1993, 2015). In the context of this research, CDA, for one thing, examines how the semiotic practices and assemblages at the Dai restaurant are afforded and/or constrained by sociopolitical discourses which are endorsed by the state and the provincial authorities; and, for another, it traces how multiscale discourses manifest in the (re)construction of provincial identities and in individuals' identification practices. To these ends, section 7.2 explores food-related metaphors — given that this research is conducted at an ethnic culture themed restaurant, which are created and (re)used to reinforce ethnic harmony, especially in contemporary China. Section 7.3 gives special attention to authenticity and *yuanshengtai* discourses relevant to ethnic minority groups, which enact and fuel the revalorisation of ethnic cultures. It also attends to the development-oriented ideologies, which underpin the revalorization of ethnic culture and traditions. Section 7.4, with its focus on identification practices entangled with ethnicity (re)construction, starts with the (re)construction of the provincial identities in Yunnan and then unpacks how the provincial identities make room for the microscale identification. This chapter ends by arguing that ethnic culture and identity (re)construction in contemporary China involves the complicated interplay between multiscale social forces and actors.

That means, this chapter addresses the research questions: (RQ2) How do individuals interpret, use, (re)semiotize, (re)locate, and (re)assemble available semiotic resources and signs for the design and authentication of an ethnic themed restaurant? (RQ3) How are ethnic minority cultures and identities constructed and reconstructed at the ethnic themed restaurant and in Yunnan, and how is the (re)construction process intertwined with the sociopolitical changes in China?

7.2 Ethnic harmony discourse drawing on food-related metaphors

The theory and practice of CDA focus on the structures of text and talk, which eventually serve to interpret the relations between discourse as social practices and social cognition (e.g. ideologies, norms, values, and perceptions), with discourse structures such as metaphors playing a crucial mediating role (van Dijk, 1993). Charteris-Black (2004) also asserts that metaphor is central to CDA "since it is concerned with forming a coherent view of reality" (p.4, in Hart, 2008:91), which is exactly what ideology involves (Hodge & Kress,1993, in Hart, 2008). A coherent view, according to Edelman (1971), can be formed through metaphors, because "each metaphor intensifies selected perceptions and ignores others, thereby helping one to concentrate upon desired consequences of favoured public policies and helping one to ignore their unwanted, unthinkable, or irrelevant premises and aftermaths" (p.67, in Mio, 1997:114). This explains why metaphors are important and necessary devices of sociopolitical discourse. They not only "allow the general public to grasp the meanings of political events and feel a part of the process" but also "resonate with latent symbolic representations residing at the unconscious level" of the recipients (Mio, 1997:130). Unsurprisingly, this metaphor-oriented sociopolitical strategy is also adopted by the Chinese government to deal with ethnic issues in China. The harmony discourses in the form of metaphors are a case in point.

These discourses, as observed by Foucault, "have a history" (in van Leeuwen, 2005:98). The Chinese concept of *harmony* originated as terms for musical instruments and the cooking cauldron and hence the notion of harmony intimately connotes the beauty of music and flavours (Lu, 2004, in Sundararajan, 2020)[10]. For example, in *Tso Chuan* (《左传》), Yangzi (晏子) (d. 578-500 BC) stated:

> Harmony is like soup. There being water and heat, sour flavouring and pickles, salt and peaches, with a bright fire of wood, the cook is harmonizing all the

[10] In terms of music, for example, *The Book of Rites* 《礼记》states that "music expresses the harmony between heaven and earth; rites represent the order thereof. Because of harmony, all things can be nurtured and grown; because of order, all things can be distinguished from each other. Music is composed according to the way of heaven, and rite is formulated based on the way of earth" (Wang, 2016:552, in Zhuang & Liu, 2023:193). That means, a harmonious and balanced relation between heaven and earth, between entertainment (music) and order (rites) is the principle of the world and the rule of nature.

> ingredients in the cooking of the fish and flesh (Fung, 1962:107, in Sundararajan, 2020:5).

Furthermore, in order to achieve a harmonious flavour within the ingredients, according to *Lushi Chunqiu* (《吕氏春秋》) (239 BC),

> you have to use the sweet, sour, bitter, acrid, and the salty, and you have to mix them in an appropriate sequence and proportion. Bringing the various ingredients together is an extremely subtle art in which each of them has its own expression (Ames & Rosemont, 1998:257-258, in Sundarajan, 2020:9).

In this cooking process, two tracks of management are involved, that is, the cook mixing ingredients and attending to sequence and proportion; and the subtle process in the cooking pot — "a bottom-up process that capitalizes on the inherent self-regulatory capacity of the system" (Sundarajan, 2020:10). The role of the former, "be it the cook or government, is to facilitate the process B [the cooking pot], rather than to micromanage it the way cookbooks do" (ibid.). In other words, in China the harmonious unity does not emerge through top-down power exercises to harmonize differences and contradictions, but instead it emerges through the joint efforts made by the state to create a competitive environment for the micro/meso-levels (e.g. regional and local governments) to have their own expression, and meanwhile by the regional and local governments to strive to stand out in this competition. In fact, when unpacking the state-sponsored ethno-tourism development in China, Oakes (1993) has identified the same operating system. That is, the Chinese state's "control (or attempted control) over flows of political economy have conditioned and enabled localized expressions of cultural difference" (p.50), through which local and regional identities have been and are being reconstructed.

An example of the multiscale interplay is the emerged political economy in contemporary China — the mayor economy (see also 2.3.1.2). It is underpinned by China's essential system of incentives and competition, to serve centralized political power maintenance and decentralized socioeconomic development (Jin, 2023:146). In this system, "economic achievement by local government officials translates into political capital" and meanwhile serves as a way for the central government to quantify and reward achievement so as to foster competition among regions (ibid., p.136). More specifically, the Chinese central government seeks to promote regional specialization,

especially to fit the provinces into the decentralized economic environment and solve problems arising from the coupling of market economy and centralized governance; the provincial/regional officials themselves seek to create and promote local culture and identity as new approaches to obtaining fiscal solvency and achieving socioeconomic development (Oakes, 2000). This system is underpinned by the logic that "[o]ne way to keep regions from banding together to oppose mandates from the central government is by creating competition" (Jin, 2023:144). In short, the state's power exercise and the regional/provincial agency in this political-economic operation showcase the roles of the cook and the ingredients respectively in the cooking metaphor discussed above.

This multiscale interplay also plays out in the circulation of another food metaphor regarding ethnic management in China. Since 2014, a metaphor of pomegranate seeds for ethnic unity has been circulated by the state and different regional governments to promote ethnic harmony and progress. Moreover, this metaphor has also given rise to a series of sociopolitical agendas at the provincial levels, namely a new round of nationwide inter-provincial competition (e.g. *Qiushi*, 2024[43]). Note that, in this competition, local governments must meet the basic criteria — a mixed population of various ethnic groups in this case — to even be allowed to participate in the contest. This explains why Yunnan with its ethnic diversity becomes an active player in the inter-provincial competition initiated by the metaphor.

Since September 21st, 2022, Yunnan, as a trailblazer for other provinces to learn from and follow suit, has officially commenced a social agenda, which is titled Project of *Shiliuhong* 石榴红工程 (literally *Project of Ripe Pomegranates*) [44]. This sociopolitical discourse metaphorizes various ethnic groups as *shiliuzi* 石榴籽 (literally pomegranate seeds), which are inherently united and in harmony within a pomegranate — the Chinese state. In practice, this project sets the goals that

> by 2024, 16 prefectures (cities) and 25 border counties (cities) will have initially achieved an all-encompassing embeddedness of the various ethnic groups including spatial, economic, cultural, social and psychological aspects; [...] and the undertones of ethnic unity will have become more pronounced, so that all ethnic groups will be as close as a family, united with the Party, and *stick to each other tightly and closely like the seeds within a pomegranate* (Ethnic and

> Religious Affairs Commission of Yunnan Province, 2022, translated and emphasized by me)[45].

This metaphor was first adopted by President Xi Jinping when he inspected Xinjiang in 2014. That is, "[a]ll ethnic groups should show mutual understanding, respect, tolerance and appreciation, and should learn from and help each other, so that, like the seeds of a pomegranate, they are bound closely together" (Xi, 2014: n.p., in Elliott, 2015:199). Since then, it has been reiterated during Xi's following inspection tours of Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, and Qinghai[46]. In fact, as early as in the 3rd century, pomegranates as a foreign plant already became a stimulus for literary competition in China and more importantly became a tool for the poets who worked for the central court to express their political sentiments (Kong, 2017, 2022). For example, when it comes to the pomegranate fruit, Pan Ni (250-311) in *安石榴赋并序* (Fu on the Pomegranate, with Preface) wrote: "十房同膜，千子如一" (Dozens of chambers all share membranes, thousands of seeds are all alike) (ibid.; translated by me)[47]. The metaphor emphasizes a shared root and sameness among the individual seeds. In other words, since being circulated in Chinese traditional culture, pomegranates have been used, though implicitly (Kong, 2022), as a political symbol which connotes unity and harmony. Edelman (1964) insightfully observed that "the goal of political discourse is not to find novel metaphors that mobilize public opinion but to use simple metaphors that are repeated continuously" (in Mio, 1997:119).

As for President Xi Jinping's inspection tours, although during his inspection of Yunnan in 2015, the pomegranate metaphor was not restated, Yunnan's Project of *Shiliuhong* is in effect a further response to this inspection. Xi's inspection then focused on poverty alleviation and work concerning ethnic groups in the province, aiming to build Yunnan into "a model area for the improvement of ethnic relations, [and] a leader in ecological civilization" (Yunnan Committee, 2015, in Summers, 2021:213-214). These goals have been materialised as the merger between ethnic tourism and ecotourism in Yunnan, which features ethnic authenticity (see 3.3.1 and 3.3.3) and *yuanshengtai* ethnic culture (see 3.3.2). Notably, these messages embedded in the metaphor of pomegranate seeds and circulated by sociopolitical discourse and agenda also manifest in the design and making of DJL (see 7.3 for further discussion).

In sum, through a CDA lens, this section has demonstrated the translation of the harmony discourses originally as a food-related metaphor into sociopolitical metaphors, which are tailored to the specific political-economic circumstances in contemporary China. Van Leeuwen (2005) observes that discourses, especially those appropriate to the interests of social actors, are resources for representation, which can be tapped into when certain aspect of social reality or knowledge needs to be represented or reconstructed. Moreover, these discourses can be actualized in various ways. To illustrate, section 7.3 examines how authenticity and *yuanshengtai* discourses — the ways of enacting the sociopolitical agendas regarding ethnic minority groups — help to reconstruct and revalorize ethnic cultures and traditional practices. It also examines the ideologies underpinning the reconstruction and revalorization process (7.3.3).

7.3 Revalorisation of ethnic minority culture through the discourses of authenticity and *yuangshengtai*

Culture provides the contents (e.g. language, beliefs, lifeways, art, music) for ethnic symbolic repositories and thus defines the meaning of ethnicity (Nagel, 1994). As such, "it animates and authenticates ethnic boundaries by providing a history, ideology, symbolic universe, and system of meaning" (ibid., p.162). In the Chinese context, the sociopolitical changes occurring in Yunnan and sponsored by the state, which seek to create a harmonious society where all ethnic groups are a unity, have increased the appeal of ethnic cultures and identities and hence contributed to their (re)construction. Among the appealing attributes attached to ethnic cultures, two features are foregrounded in the (re)construction of ethnicity, especially in Southwest China, namely, ethnic authenticity and *yuanshengtai* (see Chapter 3). This research also attends to these themes, but different from the reviewed literature, they are interpreted from a sociosemiotic-ethnographic perspective and special attention is given to the role of multiscale dynamics in the (re)construction process. Furthermore, this research also examines the underlying ideologies that mobilizes and facilitates the (re)construction and revalorization of ethnic minority culture.

7.3.1 Ethnic authenticity recontextualized with discernible sociocultural values

From a postmodernist perspective, diners can perceive an ethnic restaurant as authentic only if their desired emotions or past experiences are invoked by what they eat or see (Lu et al., 2015). When translated into social constructionist terms, this argument is rephrased, that is, "[f]ood is never consumed in isolation; it is always in context" (Beer, 2008:160). That means, in the context of ethnic-themed restaurants, there are numerous components that constitute authenticity, including the décor, the menu, the use of traditional cooking methods, etc. (e.g. Chatzopoulou, 2023; Muñoz & Wood, 2009; Jiang & Ha, 2015; Wood & Muñoz, 2007). In this sense, two major aspects of authenticity are worth investigating at an ethnic-themed restaurant — the construction of culinary authenticity and "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973) of the created social space (see 7.3.2).

Ethnic cuisine and foods serve to transmit sense of place and cultural identity at ethnic-themed restaurants (Chhabra, et al., 2013). That is, they function as "an authenticating agent for ethnic experiences through its use of markers such as ethnic ingredients (Robinson & Clifford, 2012; Sims, 2009)" (ibid. p.362). Echoing this argument, all the participants in this research also point out that local ingredients are the key to producing authentic Dai dishes. My first interview with Xuan showcases this point of view.

At a Microsoft Teams meeting, November 14th, 2023, Present: Xuan and Chun.

Extract 6 Local ingredients and seasoning are the key to authentic Dai dishes.

> **Chun:** 你之前也到景洪吃过傣味，那你对傣味，正宗傣味的认识是什么？你觉得什么是评判是不是正宗傣味的一个标准？
> You mentioned you tried Dai food in Jinghong [Xishuangbanna], so what is your opinion of authentic Dai cuisine? What do you think are the criteria for authentic Dai cuisine?
>
> **Xuan:** 嗯就是食材跟调料。
> Um, ingredients and seasoning.

Underpinned by this shared perception, the restaurant DJL purchases and transports some ingredients from Xishuangbanna, including rice noodles, roasted ox livers, *sapie* (撒撇), dried beef, and various wild herbs, to ensure the authenticity of Dai dishes. These ingredients distinguish Dai dishes from other local cuisines in Yunnan, such as

the unique bitterness and freshness of *sapie* and the soft but chewy texture of the rice noodles made of the local rice in Xishuangbanna. Most of these ingredients are only available in Xishuangbanna, especially those require unique ways of preparing and special ingredients. *Sapie* is a case in point (see Image 7.1).

Image 7.1 cold and hot *sapie* dishes

Sapie means strong and harmonious family relationships in the Dai language. *Sa* is the method of mixing various raw materials, while *Pie* refers to the bovine bile or bitter intestines (Zhu et al., 2023). *Sapie* is a cold soup mixture made of ox intestine, ox bile, beef, Chinese chives, fresh mint, and charred tomatoes and chilli peppers, which helps to clear heat and remove toxic substance from the body. It is a widely consumed appetizer within the Dai communities in Yunnan (e.g. Xishuangbanna, Dehong), given the typical humid heat in these areas. In Xishuangbanna, *sapie* is usually consumed with rice noodles. Because of the bitterness of bile, this kind of *sapie* is commonly known as bitter *sapie* (苦撒 *kusa*). According to Xuan, many local customers in the capital city are not used to the bitterness of bile or intestines, so at DJL they serve the customers another *sapie* dish — lemon *sapie* (柠檬撒 *ningmengsa*). Despite their difference, roast ox livers are an important ingredient for both. To make roast ox livers, the livers should be marinated first, then roasted and charred. Given that it is time-consuming and complicated to prepare the ox livers, the ingredient served at DJL is transported from Xishuangbanna.

As for wild edible plants and herbs, they are also available in the capital city, but according to those diners who have tried the local dishes in Xishuangbanna, such as the participant Huan and her family, they can notice the different flavours and textures

between these ingredients. Echoing Lu et al. (2015), it is safe to conclude that customers' past experiences and their expectations play an important role in evaluating the authenticity of ethnic minority food in this scenario.

Without doubt, when the ingredients from Xishuangbanna are recontextualized and (re)assembled at DJL, though paired with the local ways of cooking and ingredients, they serve as authentic makers of the Dai culinary culture. Yet, note that when being localized, these ingredients are also resemiotized to construct new representations of the Dai culture. A case in point is 傣味手抓饭 *Daiwei shouzhuafan* (Dai-style Pilaf) served at DJL (see Image 7.2). It is a symbolic Dai specialty, also known as Peacock Banquet (see also 1.2.1.2).

Image 7.2 Dai-style Pilaf

On the round wooden table on the upper floor of DJL, there is a layer of fresh banana leaves, functioning as both a tablecloth and a gigantic plate. In the middle of the plate is steamed and coloured glutinous rice (white, purple, and yellow), shaped like a round island. In the middle of the rice island, there are some fresh flowers and leaves, decorated as a living plant. The rice island is bordered with deep-fried salty peanuts. Look from a distance and one may note that the steamed rice actually is shaped to resemble a peacock's display of its plumage, with the "plant" as its vivid head and the colourful steamed rice as its fully spread tail feather. Surrounding the "peacock", an

assortment of dishes is on the banana plate, including fresh fruits (sliced watermelon and honey melon), deep-fried prawn crackers, fresh carrot and cucumber sticks, hand-shredded chicken cold dish, barbeque vegetables/*baoshao* (包烧, wrapped in fresh banana leaves while being charred over an open fire), chopped roast chicken on raw lettuce leaves and pork ribs in the boat-shaped bamboo basket, steamed pineapple glutinous rice (made sweet and sour), and various dipping sauce (*nanmi* 喃咪) and seasoning powder. Notably, this is not only a table of delicacy but also an assemblage of semiotic resources representing the Dai traditions and culture.

For example, peacocks, apart from their religious connection with the Dai people (see 1.2.1.2), are also associated with the Dai people culturally. The Dai folk narrative poem *Zhaoshutun* (《召树屯》) is about the well-known folktale *Peacock Princess* (*Kongque Gongzhu* 孔雀公主), which has been circulated in Xishuangbanna for centuries (Hao & Ren, 2019). In brief, it is about the love story of the Dai prince named Zhao Shutun and the seventh princess of the Peacock Kingdom, which involves themes like war and peace, evil and kindness, as well as sorrow and happiness. Because of this story, the Dai people believe that peacocks (the seventh Peacock Princess as the embodiment) bring them peace, happiness, beauty and luck (Hua, 2011:99). It also explains why the word *Dai* (傣) was used to name this ethnic minority group in the first place, which indicates, in a broad sense, “freedom- and peace-loving people” (Mansfield & Walters, 2007:204).

In addition, apart from wild edible plants, the Dai people also enjoy edible flowers (Zhang et al., 2023) and commonly use them to dye glutinous rice. For instance, in Image 7.2, the blue colour of the steamed rice is from butterfly pea while the yellow is from pale butterfly bush flower. To make coloured glutinous rice, before cooking, rice should be soaked in boiled butterfly pea or pale butterfly bush flower water for about five hours until it is coloured and ready to be steamed. According to Xuan, these flowers are also commonly used by other ethnic minority groups for food colouring, such as the Bai and Hani people (see also Pei, 1988). In short, these traditional culinary practices and knowledges showcase the Dai people’s understanding and appreciation of the natural surroundings where they have been inhabiting for centuries.

Besides the cultural connection between these ingredients/symbols and the Dai people, the roles of these resources in Buddhism also associate them with the Dai

people, most of whom are Buddhist believers. For example, the cannons of Buddhism specify that, to establish a Buddhist temple, four requirements must be met. One of them is that there must be the presence of some specified plants in the temple yard (Pei, 1985:325-326). Among those plants that have been identified as common species in the Buddhist temples in Xishuangbanna by Pei (1985), some of them are constituents of the Dai-style Pilaf served at DJL, including pineapples, banana (leaves), and bamboos.

The banquet at DJL, though being the cultural and religious marker of the Dai to authenticate the restaurant, also needs to be localized to cater for the local customers. For instance, the traditional way of consuming the Dai-style pilaf is with hands. Diners usually use their hands to get some steamed rice and use their fingers to form the rice into small rice balls with accompaniments from the dishes (this is what I was told when I dined at some Dai restaurants in Xishuangbanna before). This method makes the steamed glutinous rice stickier and chewier, which not only indicates the Dai people's knowledges of their food but also embodies their communal spirit and a sense of sharing. In contrast, in Image 7.2, there are dinner sets on the table available for the customers. It does not mean that the Dai people do not use dinner sets at their dinner table, but they usually prefer to eat steamed glutinous rice with hands. In brief, with the recontextualization of the Dai culture from Xishuangbanna to the capital city, some traditional practices are altered or abandoned (see also 6.2.2.3).

In sum, since ingredients are regarded as a key marker of the authentic Dai cuisine, many ingredients are transported from Xishuangbanna and then reassembled at DJL. Meanwhile, traditional ways of cooking adopted by the Dai people are also used at DJL though sometimes being altered due to the change of the social context. For these reasons, the recontextualized cultural resources and practices maintain discernible sociocultural and religious values of the Dai people. That said, DJL also caters for the local customers in terms of flavours and ways of dining, and thus the authenticity of ethnic minority food and practice is compromised for profit. In this sense, the authenticity playing out at ethnic restaurants can be seen as *recontextualized authenticity* or negotiated authenticity in Mkono's (2013) words (see 6.2.1). The following section attends to another type of authenticity at DJL — staged authenticity — in the frame of *yuangshengtai*, with a focus on the interior of the restaurant.

7.3.2 Microlevel *yuangshengtai* ethnic practices with the imprint of sociopolitical agenda

Among the dozens of video clips that Xuan (the restauranteur) sent to me, one of them particularly captured my attention. It is a recording of a sparrow flying into the restaurant and perching on the shades of the pendant lamps woven from bamboo strips (see Image 7.3). It seems that the little bird took the bamboo shade as a hanging nest. It was dinner time, and the restaurant was full. The sparrow immediately caught the diners' and Xuan's eye and became the spotlight. Xuan recorded the bird's visit at the restaurant and then posted the clip on her social media to promote the restaurant as an ecologically created space, with the caption: "A VIP guest is visiting DJL" (translated by me). This promotion was triggered by Xuan's awareness of the renowned biodiversity and natural beauty in Yunnan, especially in Xishuangbanna. She elaborated on this awareness during my interview with her and Duan.

Image 7.3 a VIP guest at DJL

At a Microsoft meeting, June 27th, 2024, Present: Xuan, Duan, and Chun.

Extract 7 Animals and plants are very representative of the local ethnic culture and the environment in which they inhabit.

Xuan: 那些动物跟植物就很能代表一个地方的民族文化跟地域环境。那一说到孔雀大象，就算是泼水节，都第一时间都会想到西双版纳。

> Animals and plants are very representative of the local ethnic culture and the environment in which they inhabit. When it comes to peacocks and elephants, and even the Water-Splashing Festival, the first thing that comes to people's mind is Xishuangbanna.

In another interview with Xuan on December 6th, 2023, to this she added:

> **Xuan:** 云南本来就是属于一个动植物王国嘛，不管加蝴蝶[到墙画上]也好，加什么鸟类[到墙画上]也好，都是万变不离其宗，都是版纳这个热带雨林是有直接关系的。
> Yunnan is a kingdom of animals and plants. No matter what elements, butterflies or birds, we add to our interior décor [such as to the wall paintings], the essence remains the same. [That is, they're] all directly related to the tropic rainforests in Banna.

It was also this awareness that inspired her in the making of the restaurant to reconstruct an urban space as *a pristine and natural one* (*fanpu guizhen* 返璞归真 in Xuan's own words) through assembling potted tropical plants, wooden furniture, bamboo-made artefacts, and creating animal-and-plant themed wall paintings, etc.. The promotion made by Xuan can be seen as an actualization of this awareness (see van Leeuwen, 2005). It is essentially underpinned by a shared perception of the connections between Xishuangbanna, its eco environment, and the Dai culture and tradition, or better still, by a semiotic ideology (see 5.4.2.2). To recap, *semiotic ideology* is the underlying assumptions of social actors in relation to what can function as signs, what purpose these signs serve, and what consequences they might produce (Keane, 2018). Echoing this, van Dijk (2006) insightfully observes that ideologies are commonly articulated and reproduced in social actors' practices. That means, semiotic ideologies mediate the consolidation of semiotic resources and signs as components of social life and ethnic cultural representations. In this case, Xuan's consciousness and the shared perception among the (targeted) consumers regarding the interconnections between eco and ethnic diversities in Yunnan are encapsulated in an *yuangshengtai*-oriented semiotic ideology (see 3.3.2).

Moreover, the design and making of DJL and its use and recreation of ethnic minority foods and cooking methods intend to create a dining experience, which features diverse ethnic cultures and pronounced biodiversity in Yunnan, fundamentally in the service of earning profits. Van Dijk (2015) observes that social actors' discursive practices and the

situations in which such practices take place are constitutive of social processes and structure (see 5.4.2.2). Aligning with this observation, I argue that the coupling of *yuanshengtai* with ethnic authenticity at DJL epitomizes the sociopolitical changes in contemporary China, which foreground cultural and ecological conservation and economic development.

The interconnections between ethnic minorities, ecological environment, and economic development have been encapsulated in the Chinese state's political agenda — Ecological Civilization/Eco-Civilization (*shengtai wenming* 生态文明). It is an equivalence to the international concept of sustainable development (Goron, 2018). According to Yin et al. (2019), the Eco-Civilization agenda implies the state's power exercise through the discourses of and capitalizing on nature, in which development is highly situated and contingent. That is, it is entangled with the complex negotiations between the state, regional governments, the market, and various social actors' agency. In this entanglement, nature is not only compatible with but a source of development. In this sense, the Eco-Civilization agenda is not only an environmental policy but more importantly a state development intervention strategy. It aims at "harmonizing economic development and environmental protection" (Zeng, 2019:2), to fundamentally address the social and political issues confronting China (Goron, 2018). In a nutshell, Wu (2016) observes that Eco-Civilization agenda is a nascent developmental model attributed with environmental sustainability.

Originally, a strategy of ecological civilization was called for by the Soviet Union in 1984 to deal with the ecological and economic crisis since the Great Depression, though the term was actually coined by the Chinese scholar Ye Qianji in 1987 (Gare, 2010). In the Chinese context, the Eco-Civilization discourse was first endorsed by Hu Jintao in 2007 and has been entrenched under President Xi Jinping's leadership since 2012. Specifically, along with economic, political, cultural, and social progress, Eco-Civilization has been listed as one of the five goals in the country's overall development plan (*Xinhua*, 2017)[48]. Since then, this political agenda has been translated into a metaphor, which was first used by President Xi Jinping and has become a widely circulated political and public discourse in China. That is, "lucid waters and lush mountains *are* (as valuable as) gold and silver mountains" (绿水青山就是金山银山; emphasized by me), shortened as the principle of "two mountains". Alternatively,

"green *is* gold" (绿色就是金子) (*Xinhua*, 2021; emphasized by me)[49]. Van Leeuwen (2005) observes that discourses, especially when targeted at the general public, prefer the language of *being*, in order to establish authority by presenting themselves as the objective truth (p.104, originally emphasized). In brief, the principle of "two mountains" is deeply embedded in Eco-Civilization, and obviously development is still the bedrock of this sociopolitical agenda (see also Wu, 2016; Yin et al., 2019; Zeng, 2019).

In 2018, Eco-Civilization was elevated to and prioritized as a constitutional principle of the PRC, and since then it has become an ideological framework for environmental policies and sustainable management in China (Goron, 2018; Wu, 2017; Yin et al., 2019; Zeng, 2019). Note that, within this ideological framework, other components of the CCP's political agendas such as poverty alleviation and the inclusion of ethnic minorities have also been entrained and mobilized (Wu, 2017; Yin et al., 2019; Zeng, 2019). Furthermore, with China's increasing engagement in global affairs, the Eco-Civilization discourse is also promoted internationally. The promotion is underpinned by a theoretical argument that Eco-Civilisation "could provide an alternative development theory capable of revolutionising the global economic order and bring about a global ecological transition" (Goron, 2018:39). In short, it highlights a balanced relationship between economic development and environmental protection globally.

Goron (2018) further argues that Eco-Civilization is closely related to the Confucian notion of harmony between man and nature (*tianren heyi* 天人合一). This notion was first put forward by the Confucian philosopher Zhang Zai (960-1127) in his *Enlightenment Through Confucian Teaching* (*Zhengmeng*《正蒙》):

> a Confucian scholar is sincere because of his understanding of feudal ethics, and he achieves such understanding due to his sincerity. That is why man and nature are united as one. One can become a sage through study, and master nature's law without losing the understanding of man's law (p.65, in Zhuang & Liu, 2023:192).

Embedded in this thinking is the harmonious unity of man and nature regulated by particular social order (Li, 2003; Zhuang & Liu, 2023). This traditional Confucian value, according to Goron (2018), is summoned to sponsor Eco-Civilization for two purposes, first, to legitimate environmental governance in China without appearing to bow to international pressure, and second, to be tailored to specific political circumstances —

the construction of a harmonious society since Hu Jingtao's era. That means, Eco-Civilization is also in the tenet of the sociopolitical harmony discourses.

Underpinned by the Confucian harmony discourses, the ethos of Eco-Civilization, when located in frontier ethnic minority areas in China, is specified as "supporting cultural traditions and coupling environmental protection with economic development" (Zeng, 2019:9). As such, a sustainable triangle relationship between ethnicity, eco environment, and economy is constructed. The reason why ethnic minorities are entrained in the promotion of Eco-Civilization lies in the recognition and hence revalorization, especially those initiated by the state and regional governments, of ethnic minority groups' traditional knowledge and cultural practices regarding natural resource use and environmental management (Crang, 2015; Liu et al., 2002; Wu, 2017; Xu et al., 2005; Xu & Salas, 2003).

In Yunnan, the recognition and revalorization have also been fuelled by the rise of ethno-and-ecotourism and the marketization of locally produced cultural and natural products from the 1980s onward. These integrated efforts are made to shape the province as a "Great Cultural Province" and a "Green Economy Province" (Xu et al., 2005; see also 7.4.1). For this reason, Yin et al. (2019) argue that Eco-Civilization campaign provides Yunnan a feasible pathway to solving the dilemmas facing it, namely, the contradictions between conservation and development, between advancement and tradition, between untainted nature coupled with traditional culture and modernized society along with ethnic progress. That means, in the emerged political-ethnic-ecological market, ethnic minorities' cultural practices, traditional knowledges, and natural habitats (e.g. Xishuangbanna), which are attached with ecological and economic values, have been reframed as a "renewable resource" (Wilkes, 2003, in Litzinger, 2004:489) to be capitalized on in service of development, politically, culturally, and environmentally. To better understand development in the Chinese context, section 7.3.3 examines its underlying logic.

7.3.3 Development-oriented ideologies underpinning the revalorisation of ethnic minority culture

CDA in sociosemiotic ethnography not only attends to discourses as and through social practices involving various semiotic resources and signs but also examines the perceptions and ideologies underpinning these practices (van Leeuwen, 2005; Vannini, 2004). To recap, *ideologies* — shared knowledges and cognition within a certain community, serve as the basis of social representations and practices including discursive ones, and as an interface between social actors' discursive and other social practices and social structures within a specific context (van Dijk, 2001, 2006). Meanwhile, discourses express, enact, reproduce, and challenge ideologies (see 5.4.2.2). That means, discourses open a window into ideologies. A case in point in the context of this research is the participants' discourse regarding development, especially economic development.

It happens that the word *development* (*fazhan* 发展) is reiterated by all of the participants in the interviews, especially when they talked about the dynamics between ethnic culture preservation and social changes. This word was embodied particularly in one sentence, which was repeated by the participants in various ways. That is, development, especially economic one, is an inevitable trend (insomuch that sometimes it takes place at the expense of ethnic culture and tradition). The last half of the sentence was not explicitly uttered by all the participants. Or as Xuan pointedly summarised in our last interview:

At a Microsoft Teams meeting, June 27th, 2024, Present: Xuan, Duan, and Chun.

Extract 8 You have to put food on the table before you can dream.

> **Xuan:** 那肯定你要先解决温饱你，你才有梦想嘛。
> Surely you have to put food on the table before you can dream.

Notably, the participants do not necessarily see economic development and the preservation of traditional ethnic culture as being conflicting, instead regarding the former as the precondition for the latter. For example, Yuan, a Dai, elaborated on this understanding during my second interview with him:

At a Microsoft Teams meeting, April 29th, 2024, Present: Yuan and Chun

Extract 9 For me, preserving yuanshengtai is actually a way of keeping up with the times while maintaining its authenticity.

Chun: 上次你讲其实你有看到你的家乡这几年发展很快，呃，你可以跟我继续讲一下，你说的发展是指的是文化还是经济，还是社会方面？

Last time you mentioned you've actually seen how rapidly your hometown has developed in recent years. Um, could you elaborate a bit more? When you say "development", are you referring to cultural, economic, or social aspects?

Yuan: 我的直观感受是经济和文化发展都挺明显的。[…比如]人居住的环境也是基本上家家都呃，盖上了自己的小楼房、小别墅，这也是它经济的发展。然后对于文化的话，就感觉像宣传的力度大了吸引很多外省人。这是一种文化的宣传和改变。

My immediate impression is that both economic and cultural development are quite obvious. [...For instance] the living environment has improved significantly — virtually every household has built their own small apartment buildings or villas, which reflects economic progress. As for cultural aspects, it feels like increased promotional efforts have attracted many people from other provinces. This indicates cultural promotion and transformation.

Chun: 那你觉得经济物质的发展和宣传的[少数民族]原生态的这个概念会不会有什么冲突？

Do you think there might be a conflict between economic development and the promotion of the concept of [ethnic minorities] as *yuanshengtai*?

Yuan: 其实不会有冲突。就像经济发展了，它能利用现在网络发达，它能更好的宣传和体现出当地的一些特色，然后让外面的人更多的涌入，像西双版纳它的疫情过后的那一年的宣传就是介绍的当地的一些特色像傣装、傣味啊，一些夜市啊，它更多的向外界宣传。[…] 对我来讲，保持原生态其实也算一种与时俱进的保持自己的原生态，它会更适应潮流的，更适应时代的，去做出一些相应的改变，又保留自己的文化。

Actually, there is no conflict. With economic development [in ethnic minority regions], people can leverage today's advanced Internet infrastructure to better promote and showcase local characteristics, thereby attracting more visitors from outside. Take Xishuangbanna for example: in the year following the pandemic, its promotional efforts focused on highlighting local features like Dai ethnic attire, Dai cuisine, and

> night markets, actively promoting these to the outside world. [...] For me, preserving *yuanshengtai* is actually a way of keeping up with the times while maintaining its authenticity. It allows [ethnic minority groups] to adapt more readily to trends and the era, making necessary adjustments while retaining their cultural identities.

The individuals' echoes of the development-oriented political-economic goals of the state and the provincial/regional governments are not coincidental. Through tracing the origins of developmentalist ideas in China, Helleiner (2022) points out that these thoughts first emerged in the second and first century BCE and proposed by the Chinese thinker Sima Qian (司马迁), who integrated Confucianism with the goals of enriching the state and the people by developing commerce, industry, and agriculture. Over the following centuries, the intellectual-led developmentalist ideas gained more currency in Chinese political-economic statecraft and thus emerged as a developmentalist ideology (ibid.). For example, Wei Yuan (魏源) (1794-1857), one of the Chinese statecraft scholars, called for a development-oriented statecraft to buttress the Confucian Kingly Way (*wangdao* 王道) which features benevolent governance[50]. His words, which have been widely circulated and woven into the Chinese political-economic reforms since then, epitomise this ideology. That is, "there have been wealth and power achieved without Kingly Way, but never Kingly Way exercised without wealth and power" (自古有不王道之富强，无不富强之王道) (translated by me) (Helleiner, 2022). This understanding of development as political and economic integration, which premises economic growth at bottom, embodies the two attributes of a *developmental state*. Specifically, in a developmentalist country, for one thing, the highest policy priority is accorded to economic growth, and for another, its institutional arrangements and incentive structures are adopted to serve that objective (Knight, 2014). Based on these criteria, Knight (2014) asserts that China has become a developmental state, especially since its economic reforms in the 1980s.

To illustrate, in contemporary China, the developmentalist ideology was explicitly translated as a state slogan by Deng Xiaoping in 1992. That is, "development is the absolute principle" (发展才是硬道理), to which Deng added that "[t]he key to solving all problems in China depends on its own development" (发展是解决中国所有问题的关键) (1993:265, in Zhang, 2023:367). Since then, this political slogan has shaped Chinese people's *developmentalist mindset* — the shared developmental ways of thinking and

behaving (Thurbon, 2019), especially given its wide and long-lasting circulation in China (e.g. *China Daily*, 2014; *Global Times*, 2023)[51]. In general, developmental mindset, according to Thurbon (2019), involves a unifying set of beliefs that the primary purpose of economic practices within a nation is to serve national security and strength and international prestige (p.322). That means, developmental mindset is intrinsically a multiscale entanglement, resulting from the coupling economy with politics sponsored by the state and from the shared beliefs and everyday practices of individuals within it.

Th formation of developmental mindset or a discursive acquisition of ideologies can be achieved through the circulation of developmental discourses (van Dijk, 2006). The acquisition relies on implicitly integrating in everyday practices or explicit ideological instruction in formalized and institutionalized ways. Either way, such ideological discourses gradually form the basic ideological framework of the group, though it is a slow process (ibid., pp.133-138). For example, the deep-seated development slogan has been reformulated in contemporary China. The reformulated version is: “high-quality development is an unyielding principle in the new era” (高质量发展是新时代的硬道理) (*Xinhua*, 2024:n.p.)[52]. It was proposed by President Xi Jinping to couple economic development with environmental governance, along with urban-rural balance, social inclusion, and global economy engagement (see 7.4.1 for the involvement of high-quality development in the provincial identity (re)construction of Yunnan). To this end, strategic tasks are specified

> to speed up the building of a modernized economy, promote greater self-reliance and strength in science and technology, accelerate the building of a new development paradigm, boost both in-depth reform and high-level opening up, and ensure both high-quality development and high-level security (ibid.).

Notably, despite the renewed formula, economic development is still the underlying logic of the national goals.

In sum, the discursive practices and semiotic representations of a social group are underpinned by the shared beliefs and ideologies within the context in which the group engage. In this research, the individuals’ multi-semiotic practices at DJL to capitalize on various cultural and natural resources in Yunnan and their understanding of the relations between socioeconomic development and cultural-ethnic conservation are acquired through the long-lasting developmentalist ideologies and discourses prevalent

in China. Their perception that economic development is the prerequisite for cultural and ethnic maintenance and revalorisation embodies these ideologies.

7.3.4 Summary

To sum up, the individuals' authenticating practices and their tapping into the concept of *yuanshengtai* at DJL indicate that social actors consciously engage in the (re)construction of ethnic cultural and natural representations, although the (re)construction is activated by and integrated into the state's and the regional government's exercise in political economy. In addition, though the microlevel practices at the restaurant are oriented by the market and driven by profitmaking, they also embody certain semiotic ideologies, which foreground the interconnections between culture, nature, and ethnicity in Yunnan. Based on these analyses, this thesis argues that microlevel actors are active participants, though also being constrained sometimes, in the political-economic market. Moreover, it also argues that the participants' understanding of the relations between social progress and maintaining ethnic cultures and traditional practices is underpinned by a deep-seated development-oriented ideology in China, with economic development as its bedrock.

Note that, ideologies as the basis of social representations and practices also specify sociocultural values of a social group and define their social identity (van Dijk, 2001, 2006). That means, ideologies and discourses intrinsically engage in the processes of social identification (see 5.4.2.2). Aligning with this argument, the following sections examine the (re)construction of ethnic identities in Yunnan based on the shared knowledges and representations within that sociocultural context. Specifically, section 7.4.1 explores how Yunnan and relevant agents have crafted the images of Yunnan being culturally and ecologically diverse. Then taking DJL as an example, section 7.4.2 unpacks how the available identities of Yunnan help legitimize local people's identification with ethnic minority groups which they are not ancestrally related to.

7.4 Provincial identity construction opening up space for ethnic identity remaking

It is for sure that ethnic culture is not the only marker of ethnicity. Rather, according to Nagel (1994), identity is also one of the foundations of ethnicity, and identity construction, along with culture (re)construction, is the result of the complicated interplay between structure and agency. The concept of affiliative ethnic identities illustrates how culture and identity are intertwined as markers of ethnicity. Jiménez (2010) defines *affiliative ethnic identities* as

> individual identities rooted in knowledge, regular consumption and deployment of an ethnic culture that is unconnected to an individual's ethnic ancestry until that individual regards herself[/himself], and may be regarded by others, as an affiliate of a particular ethnic group (p.1757; see also LeCompte & Schensul, 2010:27-28).

That means, what *legitimises* an affiliative ethnic identity is individuals' enacting the claimed ethnic identity through culture, including cuisine, language, art, festivals, etc. This enactment relies on individuals' extensive knowledges of an ethnic culture though they do not identify with that ethnicity ancestrally.

That said, affiliative ethnic identity is assumed mainly to be produced internally, though external recognition also plays a role. However, Nagel (1994) argues that individual ethnic identification relies on the options, feasibility, and advantages attached to various ethnicities which are shaped by external forces. In other words, "ethnic identity is *both* optional and mandatory, as individual choices are circumscribed by the ethnic categories available at a particular time and place" (p.196, originally emphasized). In this research, I also note that my participants claim certain ethnic identity to which they are not ancestrally related by drawing on available ethnic identity options. In other words, the microlevel ethnic identification involves both individuals' affiliating practices and the feasible options created within the social context where the individuals engage. For this reason, this research aligns with Nagel's (1994) argument for the social constructionist nature of ethnic identities and also adopts Jiménez's (2010) affiliative ethnic identity to analyze social actors' identification practices. To apply this analytical lens properly, I need to address two questions first: What makes individuals' claims

feasible? And what drives them to identify with a particular ethnic group? That is where a provincial/regional identity comes in.

The notion of *regional identity/consciousness*, first put forward in the 1940s, referred to "natural and cultural features associated with given bounded spaces or the identification of people with such entities", including landscapes, dialects, local foodways, or the names of places (Paasi, 2013:1207). In this sense, *regions* are "cultural landscapes shaped by and resulting from specific natural environments and the particular cultures utilizing them" (Long, 2004:24). That means, the concept of regional identity/consciousness recognizes geographic and cultural membership of affiliative individuals in the absence of their ancestral association with the group that they affiliate to. In brief, a provincial/regional identity provides feasibility for individuals to construct affiliative identity.

Note that individuals' affiliative identification with a provincial/regional identity involves two intertwined scales. They are encapsulated in the concept of regional identity/consciousness: the identity of a region/province and the regional consciousness of its population (Passi, 2003, 2013). The former — meso-/macrolevel identification — refers to features of nature, culture, and people constitutive of a social collective and is used to distinguish one region from others. The latter — microlevel identification — is the identification of individuals with a region/province or a social collective which is defined in regional terms (ibid.). Based on these two scales of identification, section 7.4.1 examines the (re)construction of provincial identities of Yunnan mainly through critically analysing political and public discourses. Section 7.4.2 attends to individuals' identification practices by tracing the interconnections between microlevel identification and the existing and accessible provincial identities.

7.4.1 The provincial identity construction of Yunnan Province

Aligning with Paasi (2003, 2013) and the social constructionist approach to ethnicity (see 2.2), in this research regional identity is understood as a social conduct which is (re)produced through multiscale and contextual discourses. That means, these discourses, echoing van Leeuwen (2005, 2008, 2015), are (re)contextualized social practices and power relations within and beyond the region/province. Building on this

argument, the following examines how the state, the regional and local governments, the media, and various agents intertwine in the (re)construction of the provincial identities of Yunnan.

One of the ongoing image-crafting projects in Yunnan since the 1980s is closely related to this research, that is, ethno- and ecotourism. This pillar industry in Yunnan (see 3.3 and 4.4.1) has mobilized multiple social elements — ethnic minorities accompanied by their cultures and traditions, ecological environment and local environmental practices, regional development focusing on political economy, as well as ethnic unity and progress. This provincial image-crafting project has reached a peak since the 2020s, which has been translated into and materialized as various official and public discourses.

A case in point is one of the prominent and guiding documents issued by Yunnan provincial government in 2023, which is titled《云南省人民政府关于加快推动旅游高质量发展守护好云南旅游金字招牌的意见》*Opinions of People's Government of Yunnan Province on Accelerating the Promotion of High-Quality Tourism Development and Guarding the Golden Brand of Yunnan Tourism* (the Opinions hereafter)[53]. It is a materialization of the province's prioritized developmental agenda, named as the "3815" strategic development goals. It involves a three-year plan to enhance Yunnan's economic performance, an eight-year plan to realize high-quality growth, and a fifteen-year plan to achieve leapfrog development, all foregrounding ecological protection and green development[54]. Notably, these development goals are set to respond President Xi Jinping's inspections in Yunnan in 2015 and 2020 respectively. It may explain why the Opinions has been rephrased and circulated by the state, national and local institutions, and various media[55].

There are three key concepts packed in the Opinions. First of all, in the Chinese context, "金字招牌" (*jinzi zhaopai*) means the most well-established reputation and is officially translated as a "Golden Brand" or "Golden Calling Card". It is made clear in the document that to guard the golden brand of tourism in Yunnan is exactly what President Xi Jinping suggested during his inspection tour to Yunnan in 2015, and therefore this document formulates itself as a direct response to Xi's suggestion. Put another way, Xi's remarks set the tone, though not necessarily new, for the position of Yunnan in the national development (see 7.2).

Secondly, a "high-quality development" (*gaozhiliang fazhan* 高质量发展) as a conceptual framework is referred to as the new development philosophy in official discourses and by political actors, which features ecological priority and green development. It is obvious that this philosophy aligns with the state's Eco-Civilization agenda (see 7.3.2). Specifically, during the annual session of the National People's Congress in 2017, regarding high-quality development, President Xi Jinping emphasized that "[t]he concept of *innovative*, *coordinated*, *green*, *open* and *shared development* should be implemented, with improving growth, quality and efficiency at its core" (*Xinhua*, 2017:n.p, see Endnote 52; emphasized by me). Among these five attributes of high-quality development, green development intends to address the issues of pollution and ecological degradation and strives for a harmonious relationship between human and nature (Yu, 2024: n.p.)[56]. That means, a quality-oriented approach to development is foregrounded, instead of the previous quantity-dominated one (e.g. GDP worship, see Jin, 2023).

Notably, encapsulated in the framework of high-quality development, two other developments are also closely related to ethnic minority groups, that is, coordinated development and shared development. The former strives to balance urban and rural development, while the latter aims to enhance the inclusiveness of development through poverty alleviation within China and balanced regional development beyond China (Yu, 2024, see Endnote 56). Look closely and one can notice that these two dimensions of high-quality development have already been woven into Yunnan's development agendas, which are materialized as the *yuanshengtai* ethnic industry coupled with tourism in the rural minority areas (see 3.3.2 and 3.3.3), the Project of *Shiliuhong* in service of ethnic unity and progress (see 7.2), as well as economic and cultural exchange between Yunnan and other GMS countries (see 4.4.1).

It should also be pointed out that, regarding shared development, Chinese intellectuals have read the harmony discourses featuring unity in diversity (see 2.3.1.1) into the notion of a shared and inclusive community of 56 ethnic groups (including the Han). Viewed from this compounded lens, for example, in the International Forum on the History and Future of Xinjiang held on June 12th, 2024, ethnic languages and cultures were positioned as inseparable parts of the inclusive Chinese civilization. It is packed in the discourse that "[e]thnicity is the concept in terms of language and culture, and the Chinese nation is the political entity that all Chinese people belong to, no matter which

ethnic group they are from" (Pan, 2024, in Cui, 2024: n.p.)[57]. The takeaway is that "culture of Xinjiang is diverse, but more in unity. That the unifying element is 'Chinese culture'" (Pan, 2024: n.p.)[58]. That means, the unity-in-diversity approach to ethnicity fundamentally serves to form a common Chinese culture. The *Shiliuhong* project carried out in Yunnan epitomises this approach (see 7.2). Furthermore, the position of ethnic languages and cultures as a complement to Chinese culture echoes that set by the language management in contemporary China (see 2.3.1.2).

Thirdly, the Opinions indicates the goal of Yunnan to turn itself into "a top tourism brand as a global destination" (世界级旅游胜地 *shijieji lvyoushengdi*) (Wang, 2024:n.p.)[59] through rural tourism, health tourism, cross-border tourism, sports tourism, and education tourism. All these tourism types are encapsulated in an umbrella term "Yunnan's cultural tourism industry", which foregrounds its natural scenery and cultural heritage. In addition, the "global" aspect of this goal lies largely on Yunnan's geographically bordering and opening up to South and Southeast Asia (e.g. cross-border tourism). In fact, among the five tourism types, apart from rural tourism which highlights the integration of rurality, ecology, and ethnic minorities (i.e. ethno-tourism with an *yuangshengtai*/eco label), cross-border tourism is also closely related to the ethnic minority groups. According to the Opinions, high-quality cross-border tourism aims to foreground its rich exoticness, diverse folk culture, and beautiful natural scenery. Same as rural tourism, it also capitalizes on ethnic, cultural, and eco-diversities.

What is intriguing is that the Opinions is resemiotized/translated into visual semiotics — an illustration (see Image 7.4), which is published on the website of Yunnan provincial government[60]. The left is the illustration of one tourist route across the western part of Yunnan, while the right one is specifically of cross-border tourism.

Image 7.4 the tourism ambassador of Yunnan

This illustration is included in a column named as “the elephant’s interpretation of Yunnan” (*‘xiang’jie Yunnan* ‘象’解云南). The image of the cartoon elephant echoes the photo of the three Asian elephants on the home page of the provincial website. That means, from a sociosemiotic perspective, this cartoon elephant is, for one thing, an iconic sign resembling the Asian elephants in Yunnan; and for another, an indexical sign for those viewers who know or have visited the Wild Elephant Valley in Xishuangbanna and for those who even can relate Asian elephants to the ethnic minority groups in Yunnan such as the Dai people (see how this indexicality is constructed in 6.3.2). Given that Asian elephants are only found in Yunnan nationwide — the national nature reserves in Xishuangbanna and Nangunhe (*Global Times*, 2024)[61], it is no surprise that Asian elephants are titled the tourism ambassador of Yunnan (as well as other representative roles, see the government’s official website). This title is imprinted on the white T-shirt worn by the cartoon elephant (see the right illustration in Image 7.4).

The “nomination” of Asian elephants by Yunnan government is not only the provincial authorities’ efforts to brand the biodiversity and the well-preserved ecosystem in Yunnan but also an echo of the state’s Ecological Civilization agenda. After the Asian

elephant herd's unexpected journey of leaving and then returning to their native habitat in Xishuangbanna in 2020 (see 6.3.2), the 15th meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (COP15) was held in Kunming, Yunnan, in October, 2021. At this conference, President Xi Jinping specifically referred to this incident as a proof of China's endeavour to protect wild animals and commitment to advance ecological progress (*Global Times*, 2024, see Endnote 61). In this sense, the nomination of Asian elephants as the ambassador of Yunnan is a joint effort by both Yunnan government and the state.

As for the illustrations, in the left picture, the elephant ambassador is holding a map of Yunnan. The green color of the map resonates with the features of the tourist route on the map (Western Dian tourist route 滇西旅游环线 — the western part to the Dian Lake in the capital city), which highlights biological, scenic, ethnic, and cultural diversities, and is intended to be built as a top global tourist destination. The right picture illustrates the three features of cross-border tourism — ethnic exoticness, cultural diversity, and natural beauty. In the illustration, the ethnic minority representatives are females in traditional ethnic clothing (see 6.3.1 for how the ethnic minority images are feminized by multiscale discourses), who are performing traditional cultural practices (e.g. celebrating the Water-Splashing festival, dancing). In addition, the flaming torch in the elephant ambassador's hand echoes the images of the Yi woman with a red thick headgear and the woman in white (a Bai). From a sociosemiotic perspective, the torch image is an indexical sign for those viewers (me included) who know or have celebrated the Torch Festival or Fire Festival, which is a traditional festival for the Yi, the Bai, and other minority groups in Yunnan. Finally, the natural beauty of cross-order tourism is depicted through the lush green camping site with grass and bushes, indicating a harmonious human-nature interaction (e.g. the green tent echoing the green bushes and grass).

In sum, through the readings of these discourses, I have identified two identities that Yunnan province has been crafting, namely, *Green Yunnan* (绿色云南 *lvse* Yunnan) and *Colourful Yunnan* (七彩云南 *qicai* Yunnan). The image of Green Yunnan is crafted through balancing ecological protection and economic development which is encapsulated in the concept of high-quality development and entrained by Eco-Civilization agenda. Actually, at the press conference held by SCIO (see Endnote 59),

Wang Yubo, the governor of Yunnan Province, mentioned that to strengthen the systematic protection of ecosystems, natural landscapes and relics, as well as biodiversity, a “Green Yunnan” project would be carried out in Yunnan. In terms of the identity of Colourful Yunnan, it is constructed through harmonizing ecological, ethnic, and cultural diversities. Note that these two provincial identities are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they are overlapped and therefore can be reconfigured and reconstructed during the (re)contextualization process. The emerging ethno-and-ecotourism in Yunnan is a case in point, which illustrates what a reconfigured identity is like when Green Yunnan is integrated with Colourful Yunnan to be contextualized in the ethnic minority areas.

Taking a step further, I argue that the (re)configuration and (re)contextualization practices for provincial identity (re)construction, which are fuelled by the state’s Eco-Civilization agenda within the Confucian harmony tenet and underpinned by a developmentalist ideology (e.g. high-quality development framework), have added another dimension — an ecological dimension to be specific — to ethnicity in China, especially that in southwest China. I refer to this reconfigured and recontextualized identity as *eco-ethnicity* — an assemblage of ethnicity and environment governance. The following section explores how the reformed provincial/regional identities play out in the microlevel identification.

7.4.2 Affiliative ethnic identity emerging from regional consciousness

During one interview with Xuan (the restauranteur), a Han, I asked her about how customers usually reacted when they found out that none of the staff at DJL was Dai, and whether this fact might impact the customers’ perception of the dishes served at DJL.

At a Microsoft Teams Meeting, November 14th, 2023, Present: Xuan and Chun.

Extract 10 All Yunnaness are members of ethnic minority groups.

> **Xuan:** 这倒不影响，因为*云南人都是少数民族*嘛，那我觉得菜系也是大同小异，相通的。

That's not a problem, because *all Yunnaness are members of ethnic minority groups*, and I think the cuisines [in Yunnan] are quite similar and connected.

Chun: 呃所以其实顾客只是询问一下背景但是并不会太介意你们是不是傣族，是吧？

Er so the customers just check but they don't really mind if you're Dai or not, right?

Xuan: 嗯对，只要是云南的都能接受，当然如果你要说你是东北人开傣味那可能就说不太过去。[...] *因为地域环境*的一个影响吧，比如说丽江跟版纳就隔得很远嘛，那他们的菜系是完全不同的一个种类，但是对我自己本身而言，我们离版纳很近，所以说，当然我们 JD 也是傣族的发源地之一嘛，那所以说我就会受影响。

Um, yes, as long as we're local Yunnaness, they [customers] can accept that [we're not Dai]. Of course if it is someone from northeast China who opens a Dai restaurant, that might not make much sense. [...] *It mainly depends on the geographical environment*. For example, Lijiang and Banna [Xishuangbanna] are far away from each other, so their cuisines are totally different, but for us, we're near Banna, and my hometown J is one of the birthplaces of the Dai people. That's why I have also been influenced [by Dai people and their culture].

In the follow-up interview, Xuan further elaborated on her reasons for identifying with an ethnic minority identity.

At a Microsoft Teams Meeting, December 6th, 2023, Present: Xuan and Chun.

Extract 11 Without me noticing I've been influenced by this environment, including my habits and customs.

Chun: 你之前也提到过，就是说你本身不是傣族，但是你会因为地缘的原因，因为像西双版纳离你的家乡很近，还有你的家乡有傣族文化，所以你是属于这个民族团体的一员，对吧？

You mentioned that before. You're not a Dai yourself, but because of the geographic factor, because your hometown is near Xishuangbanna and it is also related to the Dai culture, you feel you're a member of this ethnic group, right?

Xuan: 嗯，那肯定的，你就在这个地方嘛，你肯定虽然你不是[少数民族]，但是你已经被身边的这些人和事都会影响到嘛，那我觉得我自己也是[其中一员]。[...]身份证上的这个信息不能定义我是不是[少数民族]，我认为，但是我从小生长在这

> 个环境里面的潜移默化，包括我的呃一些，呃，习惯啊习俗啊。这些都是有潜移默化的在影响我们每个人嘛。
>
> Um, that's for sure. I'm living in this place, though I'm not an ethnic minority, I've been influenced by the people around me and the surroundings. So I think I'm also a member [of ethnic minority groups]. [...] The information on my identification card can't define whether I am [a member of ethnic minority groups] or not, I think so. Instead, I have been living in this place since childhood and without me noticing I've been influenced by this environment, including my er, habits and customs. All these things exert subtle influences over every one of us.

Xuan's identification with ethnic minority groups embodies two concepts — Harvey's (1973/2005) geographical imagination (see 2.2) and Jiménez's (2010) affiliative ethnic identities. Put another way, the concepts together help to unpack how individuals identify with an ethnic minority identity without an ancestral connection. That is, the identification is made possible by the existing and accessible regional identities (e.g. the eco-ethnic identity of Yunnan) and also relies on the individuals' recognition and awareness of the role of space and place in their own biography. In this sense, the identification process is encapsulated in Paasi's (2003, 2013) two-scale regional/provincial identity: the regional identity per se and the regional consciousness of its population (see 7.4). It is worth pointing out that in this microlevel identification practice, individuals' agency (e.g. self-identification with ethnic minorities and deployment of their culture) is recognized.

Specifically, as a Han, Xuan's growing up in an Yi autonomous county, which is also one of the places where the Dai people originated, has granted her with situated geographical and cultural knowledges of various ethnic groups. These knowledges later allow her to enact the claimed ethnic identity, a Dai identity in this case, through mobilizing relevant cultural elements, such as foodways, art, languages, customs, and habitats. In the mobilizing process, various signs and other cultural and natural resources are resemiotized and reassembled. The recontextualized and materialized ethnic minority cultural and natural resources at DJL, including ingredients and fusion ethnic dishes, the wall paintings, the exterior and interior décors, and artefacts, indicate both Xuan's extensive knowledges of the Dai culture along with other ethnic cultures within Yunnan and her geographic understanding and interpretation of these minority groups. As for this, Buccellati (2010) insightfully observes that the bonds, geographically

or/and affectionately, with an ethnic group and the signs/ethnic markers signalizing their valid identity are “part and parcel of the general upbring, from the moment any given individual is born into the group” (p.81) or born in the region where the group habitate. In sum, Xuan’s knowledges, understanding, and bond (both geographic and affectionate) with the group legitimise her claim on an affiliate of the Dai community, and may be also accepted by others (such as the consumers at DJL).

That said, what make Xuan’s identification with the Dai group legitimate are not only her lived experience and extensive knowledges but also the available and accessible provincial identity options in Yunnan — the eco-ethnic identity package (see 7.4.1). Specifically, the Green Yunnan image — an embodiment of environmental awareness and ecofriendly practices — justifies Xuan’s understanding of the relationship between the Dai people and the ecological environment where they inhabit. This understanding has manifested at DJL as *authentic* Dai ingredients from Xishuangbanna, the images of diverse plants and animals in the wall paintings, and various eco-friendly artefacts (e.g. potted tropical plants, bamboo-strip woven lamp shades, the dried palm leaf ceiling, banana-leaf and bamboo utensils). In addition, the provincial identity of Colourful Yunnan — an embodiment of ethnic, ecological, and cultural diversities — rationalizes Xuan’s perception of Yunnaness being members of ethnic minority groups, who mainly inhabit a natural and eco environment. This perception has manifested at DJL as the idea of a fusion restaurant, the practices of resemiotizing and (re)assembling various ethnic cultural and natural resources and signs, the presence of staff with different ethnic identities (e.g. Han, Naxi), and the wide collection of biotic resources (e.g. insects, wild edible plants and flowers, potted plants, and objects made of natural materials).

Moreover, the other four participants also share Xuan’s perception that Yunnaness are legitimate to represent ethnic minorities, such as opening an ethnic themed restaurant in and out of Yunnan. In other words, for microlevel actors in Yunnan, the identity of Yunnaness connotates membership of ethnic minority groups, at least in this specific case. The connotation is largely underpinned by social actors’ geographic imagination/regional consciousness and sponsored by the provincial identities, such as Colourful Yunnan.

In sum, echoing Nagel (1994) and Paasi (2003, 2013), among others, in this research, the individuals' claimed ethnic identities are constructed through the interplay between social structure and individual agency. That is, microlevel identification, of both individuals and social groups (e.g. the identity of Yunnaness), relies on individuals' consciousness of the existing and accessible provincial/regional identities, as well as individuals' extensive, though subjugated, knowledges of the ethnic group that they affiliate to. Based on these analyses, this thesis argues that the (re)construction of regional/provincial identities and the ethnic identity formation of individuals within this region are intertwined and mutually constitutive.

7.4.3 Summary

This section has unpacked that in the process of regional identity (re)construction, Yunnan province, sponsored by the state, is able to craft images characterized with its multicultural, multiethnic, and eco-diverse features, in order to meet its political and economic needs. As a result, the availability of the provincial identities — an eco-ethnic identity packed in the images of Green Yunnan and Colourful Yunnan — makes it possible for the local people to claim an affiliate ethnic identity. That said, the legitimacy of individuals' affiliative ethnic identities also rests on their geographic imagination and extensive knowledges of the ethnic group to which they affiliate. Based on these analyses, this section argues that the (re)construction of identities, both provincial/regional and individual identification, results from a complicated and dynamic structure-agency interplay. Moreover, the macro/meso-level identity (re)construction and individuals' identification practices are interweaved and mutually engaged.

7.5 Discussion and conclusion

Through the lens of CDA, this thesis has identified that the harmony discourses originated from food-related metaphors are translated and reformulated as ethnopolitical and ecopolitical metaphors and circulated at multiple scales of the Chinese society. To trace and analyse the multiscale interplay, special attentions are

given to authenticity and *yuanshengtai* discourses as regards ethnic minority groups. That is, this research explores how people at the Dai culture themed restaurant authenticate the restaurant by mobilizing and revalorizing cultural and natural resources in relation to the Dai people and their natural habitat. Through this exploration, I have unpacked and illustrated the complex interconnections between social actors, ecological environment, and the sociocultural systems involving political, economic, religious, and historical factors. Based on the analyses, I argue that individuals' understandings of the tensions between social advancement and conservation of ethnic culture and tradition are underpinned by the developmentalist ideology in China. This ideology is embedded in a political economy with economic development as its bedrock. For instance, the high-quality development projects in contemporary China are recontextualization and materialization of the developmentalist ideology.

Moreover, this research has also examined how individuals' identification is afforded and engaged in the (re)construction of the provincial identities of Yunnan. It has unpacked the process of socially (re)constructing provincial identities and individuals' ethnic identities. It has found that the former is (re)constructed through the jointed efforts by multiscale forces and agents, which mobilizes and capitalizes on the ethnic, cultural, and eco diversities of Yunnan. The multiscale and multi-semiotic entanglements have constructed *an eco-ethnic identity* for Yunnan, which is packed in the images of Green Yunnan and Colourful Yunnan. Moreover, the available provincial identities afford individual identification with ethnic minorities though not ancestrally related. In addition, the legitimacy of individuals' claimed ethnic identities also relies on their geographic consciousness and knowledges of the affiliated ethnic minority groups. Informed by these findings, I argue that the two identities at the micro and the meso-/macro levels are interrelated and mutually engaged.

In sum, based on the analyses in this chapter, I argue that the ongoing (re)construction of ethnicity in China is embedded in the complicated interplay between the power exercise of the state and provincial/regional governments, the emerging political-economic market, and agency of various social actors. Furthermore, echoing Oakes (1993) (see 3.3.1), among others, this thesis also argues that social actors are not passive recipients but consciously participate in the (re)construction of ethnic cultural representations and ethnic identity. In other words, they are active participants in

mediating the tensions between development-oriented social changes and their awareness of the values — affective and/or economical — of ethnic culture and tradition. At the same time, with a developmentalist mindset, they also capitalize on the opportunities afforded by the emerging political-economic markets which tap into the diverse ethnic, cultural, and natural resources in China, especially in southwest China.

Chapter 8 Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This research has examined how various semiotic resources and signs — as markers of ethnicity and its natural environment in a multiethnic region in China — are mobilized, resemiotized, and (re)assembled at an ethnic culture themed restaurant. Meanwhile, it has also explored how the accessibility and mobility of these resources and signs are afforded and/or constrained by the sociopolitical agendas (e.g. Eco-Civilization project) and the political-economic market in China. The sociohistorical review of the (re)construction of ethnicity in China in 2.3 and the reviewed empirical literature in Chapter 3 indicate that the concerns about ethnic minority groups in contemporary China involve but far beyond languages. For this reason, this research is approached from a sociosemiotic standpoint and, to capture social actors' everyday practices occurring and engaging in the multiscale contexts, an ethnographic approach is adopted. With this compounded lens, it has analysed the dynamics between individuals' multi-semiotic practices and relevant perceptions and the political-economic flows in ethnicity (re)construction. To do so, semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers are explored critically by Peircean analytical concepts (i.e. indexicality, iconicity, symbolicity) (see Chapter 6), and sociopolitical discourses and identification practices regarding ethnic minorities are examined through CDA (see Chapter 7). This concluding chapter summarizes the general structure and key points of the thesis as a whole (8.2). It then revisits the research questions (8.3) and discusses the implications of the findings drawn from this research, its potential weaknesses, and directions for future studies (8.4).

8.2 Thesis summary

My life experience in a multiethnic province in China coupled with my study in the UK has inspired me to explore ethnicity in contemporary China by adopting sociosemiotic-ethnography within the social constructionist paradigm. My project aims to unpack how and why ethnicity is (re)defined and (re)constructed by the entanglement of social

forces and actors. Through sociosemiotic ethnography, this thesis argues that ethnicity, especially in southwest China, has been reconstructed as *eco-ethnicity*. Eco-ethnicity embodies the assemblage of ethnicity and environment governance, which is afforded by the state and regional governments with various social actors' engagement. I also argue that microlevel actors are not passive recipients but actively participate in (re)constructing ethnic culture and identity and mediating the tensions between development-oriented social changes and ethnic culture preservation.

My research project focuses on two themes attached to ethnicity in the Chinese context:
(1) the diversity of ethnic cultural representations;
(2) the complicated entanglement of sociopolitical and socioeconomic forces with individuals' agency in ethnicity (re)construction.

Through these two themes, the project explores *what* semiotic resources and signs as ethnic representations are available and accessible, *how* they are designed, used, and interpreted, and what purposes they and the use of them serve (i.e. *why*).

To these ends, I adopt a social constructionist approach to ethnicity (see 2.2) throughout my journey, buttressed by a discussion of ethnicity (re)construction in China (see 1.2 and 2.3). The historical formation of language ideologies in China shows that *hanyu*-dominated monolingualism is the underlying logic of language management (see 2.3.1.1 and 2.3.1.2). Against this backdrop, when ethnicity is approached through language management and policy, ethnic languages are generally interpreted as being constrained by social forces, as is the case for the research in ethno-tourism and linguistic landscapes in ethnic areas (see 3.2 and 3.3.1). Comparatively, the research going beyond languages (e.g. *yuanshengtai* and ethnic foods) provide a fuller understanding of the multi-semiotic nature of ethnicity (see 3.3.2 and 3.3.3). It also helps to unpack the structure-agency interplay in ethnicity (re)construction. Informed by the gaps identified in the literature, I argue that ethnicity in China with its multi-semiotic and constructionist features can be better explored through social semiotics, which attends to *semiosis* — the interactions between signs/semiotic resources, semiotic practices, and extra-semiotic conditions (see 4.2). Moreover, sociosemiotic analysis focuses on multiple semiotic modes and discourses (see 4.2.1), as well as the dynamics between social structure and actors in semiosis (see 4.2.2). That means,

social semiotics provides this research with a compounded lens to exploring semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers and various social forces and actors intertwined with ethnicity (re)construction.

To better understand how social actors design, use, and interpret semiotic resources and signs in specific social contexts (see 4.4) and how meaning attached to the resources and signs is built in within trajectories of time and space, an ethnographic lens is added to this sociosemiotic research in ethnicity (see 4.3). Specifically, a remote sociosemiotic ethnography is adopted, which serves to interpret semiotic resources and practices in everyday life and examine their engagement with social systems (see 5.2). It also allows space for my interpretation and reflections, as both a researcher studying in the UK and an insider to that multi-ethnic region in China (see 4.3.2 and 5.2). Through the sociosemiotic ethnographic lens, I reflected on my life journey, explored the multilevel local contexts, interviewed the participants, collected video clips and images of semiotic resources and signs, multi-semiotic practices, and semiotic assemblages at an ethnic-themed restaurant, along with relevant political discourses of ethnicity (see 1.2, 5.3, 5.4, 4.4.1 and 4.4.2). To address the research questions (see 1.1 and 4.6), the analyses focus on the design and use of semiotic resources and signs and the entanglement of discursive power in this process. Specifically, a critical analysis of indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs (CASs) is adopted to interpret semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers and their (re)semiotization and (re)assemblages (see 5.4.2.1); and CDA is used to examine how various discourses and ideologies are entangled in (re)constructing ethnic culture and identities and how structure-agency dynamic plays out in this entanglement (5.4.2.2).

Through CASs, this research has unpacked how multi-semiotic practices and semiotic (re)assemblages mobilize accessible cultural and natural resources and various signs and involve individuals' agency and the impact of the social system (see Chapter 6). Through CDA, I have revealed how sociopolitical discourses and semiotic ideologies have impacted individuals' perceptions, design, and use of ethnic cultural resources and signs (see 7.2 and 7.3); and how the (re)construction of provincial and individuals' identities is intertwined and achieved through a structure-agency interplay (see 7.4). Through these analyses, the thesis has found that individuals' everyday practices and perceptions of ethnicity are underpinned by the Confucian harmony discourses and development-oriented ideologies and meanwhile mobilized by sociopolitical agendas

and the political-economic market in China; and that multiscale identity (re)construction is intertwined and mutually constitutive. Based on these findings, I argue that the ongoing (re)construction of ethnicity in China is embedded in the complicated entanglements of the power exercise of the state and regional/provincial governments, the emerging political-economic market, and various social actors' agency. In addition, social actors consciously participate in the (re)construction process.

The findings and arguments provide valuable insights for ethnicity studies by providing empirical evidence on the context-dependent and multi-semiotic nature of the socially (re)construction of ethnic culture and identity. Furthermore, the sociosemiotic ethnography adopted in this study has broader implications for future research that is context-specific and critical-analytical, to be conducted in a multimodal world (Kress, 2010) where increasing semiotic resources are engaged in everyday life and multimodal semiosis becomes the norm of communication.

8.3 Research questions revisited

In this section, I revisit and answer the three research questions by tapping into the findings and analyses from the previous chapters.

8.3.1 Research question 1

RQ1: What semiotic resources and signs are available and (re)semiotized to represent ethnic minorities in the multi-ethnic region in Yunnan Province, China, and particularly how are they mobilized and assembled at the Dai culture themed restaurant?

Chapter 6 has set out what semiotic resources and signs are available in Yunnan to represent the ethnic minority groups and explored how these resources and signs are resemiotized, reconfigured, and thus attached with new meanings or detached from their original meanings, along with the sociohistorical and political-economic changes. Specifically, the remote/cross-border geographic location and a multiethnic demographic, which once fuelled the marginalization of Yunnan, now are reformulated

as valuable resources featuring ecological, ethnic, and cultural diversities. This reformulation is made possible owing to the provincial campaigns to (re)construct Yunnan as “Great Cultural Province” and “Green Economy Province” (see 4.4 and 7.4.1). The (re)construction is both initiated by the provincial authorities and sponsored by the state, and it is undergirded by the Confucian harmony discourses regarding the relations between the Chinese national culture and identity and those of the ethnic minorities (see 2.3.1 and 7.2), as well as by the economic development-oriented ideologies (see 7.3.3).

At the micro level, the multicultural, multiethnic, and eco diverse features of Yunnan manifest in the design and making of a Dai culture themed restaurant located in the capital city, in the form of various semiotic (re)assemblages of ethnic cultural representations and natural materials (see Chapter 6). These cultural and natural resources are used, altered, resemiotized, and (re)assembled in the creation of the restaurant, including the interior and exterior design, wall paintings, as well as cooking and food presentation. Based on the exploration, I have found that individuals’ multi-semiotic practices to construct (re)assemblages of ethnic minority cultural representations and thus to authenticate the restaurant for profit are fundamentally mobilized by the meso-/macrolevel political-economic dynamics (see Chapter 7). That is, the design of the restaurant with cultural, natural, and other semiotic resources to highlight a human-nature harmony embedded in the Dai culture echoes the valorisation of ethnic, cultural, and ecological diversities in Yunnan, which is essentially tailored to the changing political-economic circumstances in China.

8.3.2 Research question 2

RQ2: How do individuals interpret, use, (re)semiotize, (re)locate, and (re)assemble available semiotic resources and signs for the design and authentication of an ethnic themed restaurant?

Chapter 6 has demonstrated how existing cultural and natural resources and various types of signs are resemiotized, recontextualized, and (re)assembled at DJL for its authentication. The semiotic resources and signs used to represent the Dai culture and the local ecological environment are transported, reformed, and (re)configured with

other semiotic resources (outside of the Dai community) to create new representing signs. For example, the restaurant logo as an assemblage of various semiotic resources and signs, including the Dai script and the Chinese characters of the restaurant name as well as the simplified image of a Buddhist temple, is designed to authenticate the restaurant. Among these elements, the Dai script, a symbolic sign in Xishuangbanna, is resemiotized at the restaurant which is located outside the Dai community as either an iconic sign for those viewers who saw this language before without understanding it or an indexical sign for those viewers who can relate this language to the Dai people or their habitat Xishuangbanna. In brief, the script functions as iconic or indexical authenticity. Furthermore, when this logo is relocated in different places, such as above the front door as signage, the elements in the logo are reassembled — with the Chinese characters enlarged and emphasized — and meanwhile the logo is reconfigured with the exterior décor of the restaurant. The reassemblages serve as another authentication strategy to attract potential customers.

What are also entangled in the design and authentication of the restaurant are the individuals' lived experiences and their perceptions regarding ethnic minorities. For instance, the logo design mobilized the designer's (Xuan) experiences of growing up in a Dai culture related county and her (re)visiting Xishuangbanna, as well as relying on her awareness of the gold Buddhist temple as a Dai cultural marker; and it also involved the translator's (a Dai male) mastery of the Dai script and his past experience studying in a Buddhist temple.

Based on the analyses of the resemiotization and (re)assemblage processes involved in the design and authentication of DJL, this research buttresses the socially constructionist explanation of ethnicity. That is, the (re)construction of ethnic minority cultural representations are dynamic, situated, fluid, tailored but also contingent, which involves various social actors and political-economic and sociohistorical factors. Moreover, ethnicity (re)construction is underpinned by particular semiotic ideologies regarding the interconnections between culture, nature, and ethnicity in Yunnan. As such, the resemiotized resources and signs and the designed semiotic (re)assemblages can make meaning and sense in the social context where they are created and used. That means, social actors' design, use, and remaking of semiotic resources and signs also accord with the sociocultural system and power relations of the context in which they engage. For example, in this research, the design and authentication of DJL are

tailored to the political-economic market and the ethnic, ecological, and cultural diversities of Yunnan.

8.3.3 Research question 3

RQ3: How are ethnic minority cultures and identities constructed and reconstructed at the ethnic themed restaurant and in Yunnan, and how is the (re)construction process intertwined with the sociopolitical changes in China?

Chapter 6 has ethnographically depicted and explored how ethnic minority cultural representations are (re)constructed at DJL by various actors within and beyond the Dai community, to authenticate the restaurant in the ethno-market in Yunnan. For example, the Dai dishes served at the restaurant include ingredients prepared by the Dai people and transported from Xishuangbanna. These ingredients are then cooked and presented by the Han cook at the restaurant, who has a decade long work experiences in Xishuangbanna and is also familiar with the local customers' palates in the capital city of Yunnan. In other words, the authenticating and meanwhile localizing/recontextualizing practices at the restaurant embody multiscale entanglements and are primarily market oriented.

Chapter 7 has traced and analysed how the individuals' multi-semiotic practices and their perceptions (involving their awareness of the geographic and ecological environment of Yunnan, their lived experiences, and their knowledges of the Dai culture and tradition) are constitutive of and impacted by the political-economic market and the ongoing (re)construction of provincial identities in Yunnan. This research has found that the resemiotization and (re)assemblages of semiotic resources and signs through individuals' multi-semiotic practices, though oriented by the market and driven by profitmaking, embody particular semiotic ideologies regarding the interconnections between nature, culture, and ethnicity. These semiotic ideologies are enacted through discourses of ethnic authenticity and *yuanshengtai*.

Furthermore, this research has also found that the multiscale interplay in ethnicity (re)construction in China is mediated by the Confucian tradition of harmony discourses and mobilized by the state's political-economic agendas. Specifically, the harmony discourses have been circulated in Chinese politics to manage the relationships

between the Chinese national culture and identity and those of the ethnic minority groups, especially to tackle the tensions raised by the Han-dominated management such as *Putonghua* dominated language policies (see 2.2). To address these tensions, a double-track strategy is adopted. That is, the national unity, which is enforced by the dominance of *Putonghua* and the Han culture, is complemented by ethnic diversity which features the (re)valorization of ethnicity as valuable cultural resources. These resources are regarded as constituents of the Chinese traditional cultures. In the same vein, the harmony discourses are also reformulated to address the tensions between economic development and ecological protection coupled with the preservation of ethnic cultures and traditions in contemporary China. This reformulation is sponsored by the state and the regional governments and enacted by the emerged political-economic market, in which multiscale forces and actors are engaged. Against this backdrop, provinces like Yunnan populated by multi-ethnic groups are granted new opportunities to (re)construct their images by capitalizing on their multi-ethnic and eco diverse resources (see 7.2 and 7.3). Specifically, Yunnan has crafted two symbolic images, *Green Yunnan* and *Colourful Yunnan*, to represent and brand its ecological, ethnic, and cultural diversities (i.e. an *eco-ethnic identity package*, see 7.4.1).

These crafted provincial identities thus afford and legitimise local actors' affiliative ethnic identities to which they are not ancestrally related (see 7.4.2). For example, in this research, the Han restauranteur Xuan identifies with the Dai group relying on her consciousness of the geographic proximity between her hometown and Xishuangbanna, and her extensive knowledges and deployment of the Dai culture and tradition owing to her lived experience and the social surroundings. That said, what legitimizes her claim of a Dai identity is the regional/provincial identity options provided by Yunnan. The provincial images justify Xuan's knowledges and understanding of the local ecological environment, the Dai culture, and their intertwined relationship, and thus legitimise her affiliative Dai identity. Based on these observations, I echo the constructionist interpretation of ethnicity (see 2.2) and argue that the (re)construction of individual and regional/provincial ethnic identities results from the complicated interplay between agency and social forces, engaging sociohistorical and political-economic factors. Furthermore, the ethnic identity (re)construction at the micro and meso-/macro levels are entangled and mutually engaged. That means, in the Chinese context, although

individuals need to register an official identity (see 2.2), there is still room for them to negotiate and mediate in other identity (re)formation.

Finally, as a part of the entanglements of multiscale forces and actors in ethnicity (re)construction, microlevel actors are consciously involved in the process, though being constrained sometimes (see 6.2, 6.3, and 7.3). Specifically, they are actively engaged in mediating between development-oriented social changes and their perceptions of ethnic minority cultures and traditions, which manifest in their multi-semiotic practices to resemiotize, recontextualize, reassemble, and revalorize ethnic cultural and natural resources. At the same time, their practices are in accordance with sociopolitical system and power relations of the context in which the practices take place and therefore the generated signs and assemblages from these practices can make meaning and sense. Moreover, their multi-semiotic practices and mediating efforts are fundamentally driven by profitmaking, or individuals' interests (e.g. Kress, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2005). I argue that their practices to safeguard their interests are underpinned by the developmentalist ideology in China (see 7.3.3). It is embedded in a political-economic integration with (economic) development as its underlying logic. For example, the conceptual framework of high-quality development (an embodiment of Eco-Civilization agenda as well as ethnic unity and progress), which is sponsored by the state and carried out by provincial governments (e.g. Yunnan), can be seen as a reformulation and materialization of this ideology (see 7.4.1).

8.4 Implications and future research directions

Sections 8.2 and 8.3 have summarized the key themes, findings and arguments of this research. This section draws these together to emphasize the theoretical and methodological contributions made by this research, coupled with personal implications. Specifically, to explore the two prominent themes attached to ethnicity in the Chinese context — the multi-semiotic nature of ethnic identifiers and the entanglements of social structure and agency in the (re)construction of ethnic culture and identity — sociosemiotic ethnography within social constructionism is framed in this research. It involves a social constructionist stance, social semiotic theories, ethnographic inquiry, remotely conducted methods, and a compounded lens of

analyses — a critical analysis of indexical, iconic, and symbolic signs (CASs) and a critical discourse analysis (CDA). This framework is built on two fundamental elements: Social Semiotics (e.g. Hodge & Kress, 1988; Kress, 2010, 2011; van Leeuwen, 2005) and constructionist ethnography (see 4.3.1 and 5.2). To integrate these elements epistemologically, I align with the stance of social constructionism, including the (re)construction of ethnicity, culture, identity, discourse, and ideology. Regarding methodology, I embrace the context-specific sensibility and the genealogical and multiscale capacities of ethnography. In sum, the coupling of social semiotics with ethnography in the study of ethnicity constitutes unique theoretical and methodological contributions. Sections 8.4.1 and 8.4.2 reflect on the sociosemiotic approach to ethnicity and the ethnographic stance taken in this research, with their respective contributions. Following that, I reflect on my research journey and discuss why this research matters to me (8.4.3). This chapter ends with suggestions for future research drawn from the findings of this research (8.4.4.1) and a reflection on the limitations and constraints of this project (8.4.4.2).

8.4.1 Theoretical contribution: Ethnicity through the lens of Social Semiotics

Aligning with Kress (e.g. 2001, 2010, 2011) and van Leeuwen (2005), among others, I attend to ethnicity from a sociosemiotic perspective. In other words, this research contributes by bringing the capacities of social semiotics to deal with meaning in all forms and unpack the multiscale interplay embedded in semiosis into the field of ethnicity studies. As the sociohistorical review of China (see 2.3) shows, when it comes to ethnicity in China, ethnic minority languages are no longer the defining marker, at least not the only one. There are other cultural and even natural attributes of ethnic minority groups, which open up space for unpacking the multilayered bundle of ethnicity, especially viewed in the light of social constructionism (see 2.2). Furthermore, in reality, the sociopolitical changes in China, such as the emerged ethno-market in southwest China which is fuelled by the integration of Eco-Civilization agenda into national development goals (see 7.3.2 and 7.4.1), has attached an ecological label to ethnicity. Social semiotics, as Kress asserts (2001), “provide[s] an account of human semiosis in all its manifestations” (p.67). For this reason, it serves the purpose to approach the emerged *eco-ethnicity* in the Chinese context. In sum, in this research I

adopt sociosemiotic theories to explore ethnicity (re)construction in the Chinese context, in order to examine diverse semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers and the structure-agency dynamics embedded in the (re)design and (re)use of the resources and signs.

8.4.2 Methodological contribution: Sociosemiotic ethnography in the Chinese context

Section 8.4.1 has identified the capacities of social semiotics to interpret multi-semiotic practices in everyday life which mobilize various cultural and natural resources and to unpack the entangled social forces and actors in these practices. To better achieve these goals, a constructionist ethnographic approach is needed. It not only attends to multiscale social contexts in which a particular culture and its meaning are built in across time and space (see 4.3.1 and 5.2) but also leaves room for my reflexivity and interpretation (e.g.1.2). In fact, sociosemiotic ethnography is not new in any sense (see 5.2), but *Chinese sociosemiotic ethnography* is.

Since a distinction made between the Han and the minority groups in China, when it comes to ethnicity, it is always packed with biological, social, political, historical, economic, and more recently ecological factors (see 1.2.1, 2.2.3, 2.3, and Chapter 3). It falls squarely within the research scope of sociosemiotic ethnography, the compounded lens of which attends to social actors' (re)design and (re)use of semiotic resources and signs and to the multiscale social forces intertwined with these multi-semiotic practices and processes. In other words, a sociosemiotic ethnographic inquiry into ethnicity in the Chinese context examines what semiotic resources and signs as ethnic markers are available and how they are accessible for social actors to make meaning and sense in the context where they engage, as well as to what end.

Moreover, to unpack the complex entanglement embedded in ethnicity (re)construction in China, the Chinese version of sociosemiotic ethnography, in terms of its analytical tools, requires an extra critical lens. The critical-analytic capacity of sociosemiotic ethnography involves its attention to semiotic resources and signs and to discourse and its relationship with multiscale contexts. That means, a CASs lens (see 5.4.2.1) and a CDA approach — especially the version focusing on the interconnections between individuals' practices and perceptions and sociopolitical changes and ideologies (see

5.4.2.2) — are an integral part of this critical ethnography (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 for exemplification).

Another key contribution of this research is the method of conducting the ethnographic fieldwork with the assistance of Internet — a remote ethnographic inquiry. For anthropologists and ethnographers, it is not uncommon to conduct remote and digital fieldwork, out of consideration for politically sensitive situations and pandemic restrictions (see 5.2.3). In my case, my previous local experience — my thirty-plus years' living experiences and a decade of working in different multi-ethnic areas in Yunnan — and thus my familiarity with the local sociocultural context and my long-time acquaintance with some participants largely compensate for the Internet-mediated long-distance fieldwork. Despite the feasibility of the digitized ethnographic practices, there are unavoidable limitations, which is discussed in section 8.4.4.2.

8.4.3 Personal implications

As elucidated in Introduction, this research was inspired by my life experiences especially my working in multiethnic areas in China and my study abroad. There was a more personal motivation, also less grand one, but it has spurred me on to complete this research. When I started my study in the U.K., I had more access to various discourses (see 5.3.3 as an example of Internet restrictions in China). I was excited to hear various voices and see from diverse perspectives, but soon I got confused about the overwhelming criticism about China. To be fair, some of the criticism was well-grounded and objective, but I did notice some widespread misconceptions about China. Yet, what disturbed me most was not the criticism per se, but the fact that I did not know how to let people outside China see what China was really like. At that moment, I realized that I did not actually know my home country. Worse still, I was not sure if I could present China to the outside world, because I myself had been a critic of Chinese sociopolitical systems before (see 1.2.2.1).

That means, this research is not only in search of the real China, at least the one that I attempt to demonstrate based on well-founded understandings and want the world to see; but equally importantly it is an answer that I have been searching for over my whole doctoral journey.

8.4.4 Suggestions for future research

This section makes suggestions for future research in ethnicity by drawing upon the findings from this research and then discusses its limitations.

8.4.4.1 Ethnopolitics and ecopolitics integration in China

Sections 8.4.1 and 8.4.2 have demonstrated the emerged ethnicity with Chinese characteristics, namely, the assemblage of ethnicity and environment governance. It is afforded and facilitated by the state's power exercise, as well as those of regional governments and various agents, in its political economy. This assemblage manifests itself in the ethno-market and cultural-ecological conservation and meanwhile constructs a new ethnic identity — *eco-ethnicity*, especially in southwest China (see Chapter 7). That means, to understand and interpret ethnicity in contemporary China, the political-economic and ecological dimensions of the social constructionist lens should be sharpened. For example, this research paid special attention to the state's and regional governments' exercise in political economy, ecopolitics, and ethno-politics, as well as to individuals' role — though mainly driven by the market — in the (re)construction of ethnic culture and identity. In this way, it has unveiled a more dynamic and multidimensional picture of ethnicity (re)construction (see Chapter 6 and Chapter 7), instead of the stereotypical picture of the rigid dichotomy between individuals and social structure, usually with the former submitting to the latter (see examples in 3.2 and 3.3.1). For this reason, I believe that an increased sensibility to the socially constructed and multi-semiotic nature of the social world, especially to the roles of political economy, environmental governance, and individuals' agency, could open more space for future sociosemiotic ethnographic studies.

8.4.4.2 Final remarks

The aspects suggested above to explore the multi-semiotic and socially constructed world are intriguing and worthy of attention. This study, however, could not attend to them fully given the limitations in accessing different voices, such as those of the rest of

staff at DJL and consumers. It was also limited because I was unable to visit the restaurant myself and interview the participants in person (see 5.4.1.1and 5.4.1.2). In other words, if it was possible to conduct onsite interviews and observations, I would have more in-depth interactions with the participants and be able to see and observe the social space and practices through my own eyes and based on my own interpretation, instead of being "filtered" first by the participants (e.g. Xuan and Duan), namely second-hand observations. For this ethnographic research, first-hand observations and face-to-face interviews would contribute more insights and perspectives.

Nevertheless, this thesis has demonstrated that ethnicity in China is and still being reconstructed by entangled social forces and actors, entailing the state, regional/provincial governments paired with relevant institutions, the volatile market, international and national political-economic flow, and multiscale actors. Moreover, the thesis has indicated that in this complex entanglement, microlevel are not passive recipients. Rather, they play an important and active role in the reconstruction of ethnic minority culture and identity. For example, they enact their provincial/regional consciousness and their extensive knowledges of the ethnic cultures and traditions, on which they can capitalize when located in the ethno-market. Overall, this thesis extends the argument to the social constructionist interpretation of and sociosemiotic ethnographic studies of ethnicity.

Appendix A Consent Form: restaurant owners

CONSENT FORM: restaurant owners

Version 2.0 9-October-2023
ERGO project ID: 88894

Study title: Trans-semiotizing practices in a multicultural and multilingual region in China
Researcher name: Chun Yang
ERGO number: 88894

1. I have read and understood the Letter of Permission and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

2. I give permission to Chun Yang to conduct Internet-mediated qualitative inquiries in my restaurant, including

- **recruiting participants and collecting photographs and videos of artistic and other creations (e.g. drawings, wall paintings, signage, food presentations) produced in the restaurant;**
- **collecting photographs and videos of the layout and the designs of and the objects available in the restaurant.**

Name of approver (print name).....

Signature of approver.....

Date..... .....

Name of researcher (print name).....

Signature of researcher .....

Date.....

Appendix B Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Version 3.0 25-October-2023

ERGO project ID: 88894

Study Title: Trans-semiotizing practices in a multicultural and multilingual region in China

Researcher: Chun Yang

ERGO number: 88894

You are being invited to take part in the above research study.

- To help you decide whether you would like to take part or not, this information sheet elucidates why the research is being done and what it will involve.
- Please read the information below carefully and ask questions if anything is not clear or you would like more information before you decide to take part in this research.
- If you are happy to participate you will be asked to sign a consent form.

What is the research about?

I am Chun Yang, a PGR student at the University of Southampton.

This research is inspired my five-year experiences as a volunteer teacher in a multi-ethnic county and my four-year experiences as an English lecturer at a local university in Yunnan, China.

This project seeks to understand how various languages, cultures, and other resources in a multicultural and multilingual region are used in practice and the meanings associated with these practices.

Why have I been asked to participate?

You have been invited to take part in this study to help us to better understand how languages, cultures, and other resources in a multicultural and multilingual region are used in practice and the meanings associated with these practices.

This may be because:

- You are living in Yunnan, China, and your work is related to culture (e.g. food culture, local cultures) and creation.

What will happen to me if I take part?

This is an Internet-mediated qualitative study, during which the researcher will collect photographs and videos of artistic and other creations (e.g. drawings, wall paintings, signage, food presentations) produced by you. Based on the photographs and videos you send to the researcher, you will be interviewed. The research is expected to last until July, 2024. If you decide to take part in this study,

- you will send videos and photographs of your artistic and other creations and the space where you work to the researcher but exclude any identifiable information (e.g. your faces, the name of the restaurant). You will share the photographs and videos with the researcher via Microsoft Teams or Outlook.

- Following the reception of the photographs and videos that you send, the researcher will interview you via Microsoft Teams or Outlook. In addition, the researcher will also interview you about your lived experiences (e.g. language biography, working experiences). Each interview will last approximately 45 minutes, but the interviews will

  be arranged in advance according to your free time. You should make sure that you are in a safe place when you are interviewed. The interviews will be conducted with the camera off and be audio-recorded. It is expected that there will be a maximum of 10 interviews during the project.

The photographs, videos, and audio-recorded interviews will be transcribed with any reference to names removed and other identifying information confidential.

After the data collection ends, the researcher may contact you again for clarifying information.

Are there any benefits in my taking part?

We cannot guarantee that there will be direct benefits to you as a participant from taking part in this study. Yet, we hope that the information gained from this study will help make the values of various languages, cultures, and other resources widely recognized.

Are there any risks involved?

We do not anticipate there being any risk to you from taking part in this study. However, whilst the researcher will take every care with the data you share, you should only provide the information that you are prepared to be made public. This is because the record of the online conversations and data sharing could theoretically be breached or hacked, outside the control of the researcher.

What data will be collected?

- The photographs and videos that you send to the researcher and the recorded online interviews will transcribed and stored in password protected University computer and University OneDrive account. The information will be used by us to inform the resources generated at the end of the research, including potentially using anonymised quotes. Names will be removed and other identifying information be kept confidential.
- Information, including your ethnicity and gender identity, and opinions you give in the interviews will be recorded, transcribed, and stored in password protected University computer and University OneDrive account. They will be used by us to inform the resources generated at the end of the research, including potentially using anonymised quotes. Names will be removed and other identifying information be kept confidential.
- Transcriptions without any names from the images and interviews will be kept for the

  University of Southampton's standard data retention period of 10 years on a secure University server and then will be destroyed. During the whole time, the identifying information will remain strictly confidential.
- Your contact details will be taken by us so we can contact you during the research. These contact details will be stored in password protected University computer and University OneDrive account and destroyed when the research ends.

Will my participation be confidential?

Your participation and the information we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential.

Only members of the research team and responsible members of the University of Southampton may be given access to data about you for monitoring purposes and/or to carry out an audit of the study to ensure that the research is complying with applicable regulations. All of these people have a duty to keep your information, as a research participant, strictly confidential. In addition, to keep your confidentiality, you should not discuss the research project with anyone in the region where you live and work.

However, although every reasonable effort will be taken by the researcher, confidentiality during actual Internet communication procedures cannot be guaranteed. To minimize any risk, you should only provide the information that you are prepared to be made public.

Do I have to take part?

No, it is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you decide you want to take part, you will need to sign a consent form to show you have agreed to take part.

What happens if I change my mind?

You have the right to change your mind and withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without your participant rights being affected.

If you withdraw from the study, we will delete the information about you that we have already obtained up to this point; But you must withdraw before November 30th, 2024 to ensure your information is not included in the final study.

What will happen to the results of the research?

- A doctoral thesis based on this study will be written up. Your personal details will remain strictly confidential. Research findings made available in any reports or publications will not include any information that can directly identify you. You can contact me to ask for a copy of publications associated with the research project.
- The data generated through recorded materials and interviews will be deposited in the University data repository for future studies, which may include transcriptions, audio recordings, a video, and images. Information in these resources will be confidential, but anonymised quotes may be used. The data will be kept for the University of Southampton's standard data retention period of 10 years and then will be destroyed.
- Your names and contact details will be kept until the study ends and will then be destroyed.

Where can I get more information?

If you have any further questions after reading this information sheet, or to find out more about how your information will be used, please contact the researcher, Chun Yang via email: cy1u21@soton.ac.uk.

What happens if there is a problem?

If you have a concern about any aspect of this study, you should speak to the researcher (Chun Yang cy1u21@soton.ac.uk) who will do her best to answer your questions.

If you remain unhappy or have a complaint about any aspect of this study, please contact the University of Southampton Head of Research Ethics and Clinical Governance (023 8059 5058, rgoinfo@soton.ac.uk).

Thank you for reading this participant information sheet and considering taking part in our study.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The University of Southampton conducts research to the highest standards of research integrity. As a publicly-funded organisation, the University has to ensure that it is in the public interest when we use personally-identifiable information about people who have agreed to take part in research. This means that when you agree to take part in a research study, we will use information about you in the ways needed, and for the purposes specified, to conduct and complete the research project. Under data protection law, 'Personal data' means any information that relates to and is capable of identifying a living individual. The University's data protection policy governing the use of personal data by the University can be found on its website (https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-andhttps://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.pagefoi.page).

This Participant Information Sheet tells you what data will be collected for this project and whether this includes any personal data. Please ask the research team if you have any questions or are unclear what data is being collected about you.

Our privacy notice for research participants provides more information on how the University of Southampton collects and uses your personal data when you take part in one of our research projects and can be found at http://www.southampton.ac.uk/assets/sharepoint/intranet/ls/Public/Research%20and%20Integrity%20Privacy%20Notice/Privacy%20Notice%20for%20Research%20Participants.pdf Any personal data we collect in this study will be used only for the purposes of carrying out our research and will be handled according to the University's policies in line with data protection law. If any personal data is used from which you can be identified directly, it will not be disclosed to anyone else without your consent unless the University of Southampton is required by law to disclose it.

Data protection law requires us to have a valid legal reason ('lawful basis') to process and use your Personal data. The lawful basis for processing personal information in this research study is for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest. Personal data collected for research will not be used for any other purpose.

For the purposes of data protection law, the University of Southampton is the 'Data Controller' for this study, which means that we are responsible for looking after your information and using it properly. The University of Southampton will keep identifiable information about you for 1 year after the study has finished after which time any link between you and your information will be removed.

To safeguard your rights, we will use the minimum personal data necessary to achieve our research study objectives. Your data protection rights – such as to access, change, or transfer such information - may be limited, however, in order for the research output to be reliable and accurate. The University will not do anything with your personal data that you would not reasonably expect.

If you have any questions about how your personal data is used, or wish to exercise any of your rights, please consult the University's data protection webpage (https://www.southampton.ac.uk/legalservices/what-we-do/data-protection-and-foi.page) where you can make a request using our online form. If you need further assistance, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer (data.protection@soton.ac.uk).

Appendix C Participant Consent Form

CONSENT FORM: Participant
Version 3.0 25-October-2023
ERGO project ID: 88894

Study title: Trans-semiotizing practices in a multicultural and multilingual region in China

Researcher name: Chun Yang

ERGO number: 88894

Please sign in the box(es) if you agree with the statement(s):

I have read and understood the information sheet (PIS version 3.0) and have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.	
I agree to take part in this research project and agree for my data to be used for the purpose of this study.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I understand my participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time for any reason without my participation rights being affected.	
I understand that should I withdraw from the study then the information collected about me up to this point will be deleted; But I must withdraw before November 30th, 2024 to ensure my information is not included in the final study.	
I understand that I may be quoted directly in reports of the research but that I will not be directly identified (e.g. that my name will not be used).	
I understand that taking part in the study involves (i) audio recording, (ii) video recording, and (iii) photographs taken for the purposes set out in the participation information sheet.	
I agree to take part in (i) *online interviews, (ii) photographing and video-recording my artistic and other creations (e.g. drawings, wall paintings, signage, food presentations) and sharing the photos and videos with the researcher* for the purposes set out in the participation information sheet; and I understand that these will be recorded using (i) *audio, (ii) video, (iii) photographs, and (iv) written notes* and conducted via Microsoft Teams and Outlook.	
I understand that any information collected by the researchers will be kept confidential, but confidentiality and my anonymity during actual Internet communication procedures cannot be guaranteed.	

I understand that my personal information collected such as my name, my Wechat ID etc. will not be shared beyond the study team.	
I understand that sensitive category information will be collected about me to achieve the objectives of the study: my ethnicity, gender identity, and my opinions on ethnic identities, and that these information will be stored safely.	
I give permission for the (i) videos, (ii) audios, and (iii) photographs that I provide to be *held by the University of Southampton* as described in the participant information sheet so they can be used for the research.	
I give permission for the researcher to contact me again to clarify information about me.	

Name of participant (print name).....

Signature of participant.....

Date..... .....

Name of researcher (print name).....

Signature of researcher .....

Date.....

Appendix D Semi-structured interview themes

Table 2 Topics and sample questions for interviews

Interview topics	Sample questions
background questions	(1) Which ethnic group do you belong to? (2) Which languages do you speak, including dialects? Which languages do you use in your daily life?
opinion/perception questions	(1) Why do you run a restaurant themed on Dai cuisine? (2) Can you tell me your understanding of Dai culture, including Dai cuisine, customs, language, etc. (3) What do the customers think of your restaurant, including the decoration, the food, etc.? (4) Have you heard that people use yuanshengtai and authenticity to describe Yunnan, especially the ethnic minority groups? If you do, how do you understand these words? How and why do people use them?
questions regarding ethnographic observations	(1) I notice you use (the images of Asian elephants/a peacock/a Dai woman/plants…) in your creations. Can you tell me what it implies? Why do you use it? (2) What elements are included in the logo of the restaurant? Why are these elements used? (3) Why are lemongrass and banana leaves commonly used in Dai cuisine to tie up and wrap up ingredients while cooking? (4) On the left side wall at the entrance, there is a pair of gigantic butterfly wings, why did you choose the image of a butterfly?
questions concerning the participants' lived experiences	(1) Can you tell me more about your life since you were little? How does it connect with the Dai culture and other minority cultures?

	(2) You mentioned that your hometown is also one of the birthplaces of the Dai culture. Can you tell me the Dai cultural heritage and presentations in your hometown? What do you think is the impact of it on you? (3) Do you still remember when you first realized there were different ethnic minority groups in Yunnan? What happened? (4) During your living and working in Xishuangbanna for the past twenty years, have you ever felt you are a member of any local ethnic minority group? Why or why not?
follow-up questions	(1) Last time, you used the word "fusion" for many times, can you illustrate more? Besides, why do you want to have a restaurant integrating various cultures and cuisines? (2) During the last interview, you mentioned the geographic location of Yunnan is unique. Can you tell me what do you mean by 'unique'? (3) Last time, you mentioned Yunnan as the "Kingdom of Plants and Animals". Can you tell me where did you learn about it? How do you understand it?

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Endnotes

1 Hu, C. (2019). *Unique Jueban woodcut paintings in SW China's Yunnan*. XinhuaNet. Available at: http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2019-12/08/c_138614976.htm

2 Zhang, K. (2014). German expressionism on view in Shanghai. China Daily, available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/culture/art/2014-08/08/content_18268296.htm

3 绝版木刻拓创者贺昆：从"有形"到"无象" (baidu.com) (in Chinese) *Reduction Woodblock Prints Pioneer He Kun: from "tangible" to "expressionistic"* (the title is translated by me).
Jueban woodblock prints was created in Yunnan Province, and the pioneer artists expressed their deep emotions deriving from urban life through their perspective of local minority and folk art, transforming it into a new art style.

4 Luo, K. (2023). Dai people's awe of nature reflected in daily meals. *Global Times*, available at https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303206.shtml.
In addition, the photo in question is cited from this article.
A similar article titled "A taste of China's tropics" published by *China Daily* circulates the same rhetoric to link natural environment with ethnic minority cultures by stating that "if you yearn for a bite of the tropics, you should definitely turn to the Dai cuisine(傣菜), which has its roots in the Dai autonomous prefecture of Xishuangbanna at the southern edge of Yunnan province. [...] In China, they [the Dai people] are known for their folk arts, brown-skinned beauties, and, perhaps above all else, their food, which features distinct spices and tastes" (Huang, 2015: n.p.). It is available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201505/22/WS5a2b4348a310eefe3e99f38c.html .

5 Shi, L.-W. (n.d.). Peacock dance. *China Culture*, available at https://en.chinaculture.org/classics/2011-06/21/content_420022_2.htm.

6 This article is titled "Ready Squad", which is on *China Daily*, available at https://www.chinadailyhk.com/article/303398

7 National Bureau of Statistics. (2021). *Main Data of the Seventh National Population Census*. Retrieved from http://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202105/t20210510_1817185.html

8 *Law of the People's Republic of China on regional ethnic autonomy* (2001 Amendment). Standing Committee of the National People's Congress. Available at https://www.lawinfochina.com/display.aspx?lib=law&id=6211&CGid=.

9 Constitution of the People's Republic of China. (2018 Amendment). National People's Congress. Available at: Constitution of the People's Republic of China (www.gov.cn).

10 "*A Global Community of Shared Future: China's Proposals and Actions*" (White Paper) issued by the State Council Information Office of the PRC in 2023 reiterates the discourse of harmony, diversity/multilateralism, and unity, but in a global context. It is available at http://english.scio.gov.cn/node_9004328.html

11 Zhuang Zi's *Free and Easy Wandering* (《逍遥游》) and *Discussion of the Equality of Things* (《齐物论》) encapsulate and underpin the modern concept of posthumanism (Wang, 2022). Specifically, *Free and Easy Wandering* demonstrates an unobstructed flow of cross-species becoming (物化) — the equal, transversal, heteromorphic, continuous, and unperceivable process of changes, indicating all things fundamentally are interconnected with each other — a symbiotic existence. It is the first stage of cosmic development for Zhuang Zi, prior to the birth of human beings. At this phrase, all things, living and material, embrace the fluidity of constant becoming. At the second stage featuring the gradual formulation of boundaries between different species with the emergence of human beings, though all species still enjoy equal status due to the absence of "right and wrong". At this stage, there is a harmonious coexistence between human and the non-human. By contrast, the third stage, with the acknowledgement of "right and wrong", is anthropocentric domination, in which men establish the institution of ranking systems. The second and the third stages are exemplified, with the latter being criticized, in *Discussion of the Equality of Things* (see Wang, 2022, for detailed analyses of these two articles in relation to posthumanism). It is not surprising that some scholars read *Discussion of the Equality of Things*, or Zhuang Zi's thoughts in a general sense, as the Taoist approach to challenging the Confucian stratification of social classes and human values.

12 The English version of the law is available at Law on the Standard Spoken and Written Chinese Language of the People's Republic of China - Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China

13 For example, *Education Law of the PRC* issued in 1995 stipulates that "(Article 12) The Chinese language, both oral and written, *shall be* the basic oral and written language for education in schools and other educational institutions. Schools or other educational institutions which mainly consist of students from ethnic minorities *may use* in education the language of the respective ethnicity or the native language commonly adopted in that region" (emphasized by me; available at Education Law of the People's Republic of China -- china.org.cn)

14 Sun, X. (2022). Decoding China's "Common Prosperity" Drive. *LSE Ideas Strategic Update*. Available at https://www.lse.ac.uk/ideas/Assets/Documents/updates/LSEIdeas-Decoding-Chinas-Common-Prosperity-Drive.pdf

15 The Chinese version of this official document is available at 国家语言文字工作"十一五"规划 - 中华人民共和国教育部政府门户网站.

16 The directive (in Chinese) is available at 教育部 国家语委关于印发《国家语言文字事业"十三五"发展规划》的通知 - 中华人民共和国教育部政府门户网站.

17 The Chinese version of this directive is available at 教育部 国家语委关于印发《国家中长期语言文字事业改革和发展规划纲要（2012—2020 年）》的通知 - 中华人民共和国教育部政府门户网站.

18 The first phase of *Yubao* project was completed in 2019 which covered 34 provinces and regions in China and surveyed 103 endangered dialects. Followed that, on April 19th, 2021, the second phase of the project was officially launched by the Ministry of Education. (China Daily, 2021, available at https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202104/20/WS607e2f18a31024ad0bab69de.html) There are official websites titled "the data collection, recording, and display platform for the Chinese language resources protection project" and "Center for the Protection and Research of Language Resources of China", both of which are the outcomes of *Yubao* project, open to the public. (Available at https://zhongguoyuyan.cn/index/ and http://www.chinalanguages.cn/home)

19 This article titled "China launches campaign to promote Putonghua" (2020) is published by *Xinhua Net*, available at http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-09/14/c_139367448.htm.

20 It is titled "Mandarin Chinese promoted to reduce poverty" (2019), which is published by *Xinhua Net*, available at https://english.www.gov.cn/statecouncil/ministries/201910/17/content_WS5da79f95c6d0bcf8c4c153f4.html

21 "Protection and Promotion of Linguistic Diversity of the World: *Yuelu* Proclamation" was issued on the 1st World Language Resources Protection Conference titled "Role of linguistic diversity in building a global community with shared future: protection, access and promotion of languages". (Available at: https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/yuelu_proclamation_en.pdf) The *Yuelu* Proclamation is also an important supporting document for the "UN International Year of Indigenous Languages 2019".

22 *National Eco-Tourism Plan* (2016-2025) was issued by National Development and Reform Commission in 2016, available at https://www.ndrc.gov.cn/xxgk/zcfb/ghwb/201609/t20160906_962192.html

23 China Culture and Development Partnership Framework (CCDPF) project is sponsored by the United Nation. It was carried out in five ethnic minority villages in southwest China, including Guizhou and Yunnan provinces from 2008 to 2011, supplemented by Wu's decade-long observations of how ethnic minorities' foods were marketed in China (Wu, 2016a). The aim of this project was to integrate culture into the development of marginalized ethnic minority areas. See Tapp and Wu's (2011) report for detail: Final Evaluation of Millennium Development Goals Fund (MDG-F) China Culture & Development Partnership Framework (4 November 2008 – 3 November 2011), UN CDPF Publication No. 24.

24 Yang, F. (n.d.). The "Ancient Tea and Horse Caravan Road", the "Silk Road" of Southwest China. *Silk Road: History of silk road*. Available at: http://www.silkroadfoundation.org/newsletter/2004vol2num1/tea.htm

25 See the provincial publicity video (in Chinese) published on the official website of People's Government of Yunnan Province (https://www.yn.gov.cn/yngk/), which is titled

"An Open China: Amazing Yunnan, Sharing Its Best with the World"（开放的中国：魅力云南，世界共享）. This video visually and verbally summaries the predominant features of Yunnan, including its eco, ethnic, cultural, and economic diversities.

26 It is available on the website of People's Government of Yunnan Province https://www.yn.gov.cn/yngk/szmp/201902/t20190227_99300.html (in Chinese).

27 The website of the Linguistic Ethnography Forum (LEF) is available at https://www.lingethnog.org/ .

28 The definition of *linguistic anthropology* is available on the official website of Indiana University: https://anthropology.indiana.edu/about/four-fields-of-study/linguistic-anthrolopology.html

29 Research Ethics and Governance of the University of Southampton is available at https://sotonac.sharepoint.com/teams/RIS/SitePages/Research-Ethics-and-Governance(3).aspx
Research Support of the University of Oxford is available at https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/
HRPP is available at https://hrpp.research.virginia.edu/teams/irb-sbs/researcher-guide-irb-sbs/recruitment-and-informed-consent-educational-setting

30 Specifically, the *Data Security Law of the People's Republic of China 2021 (2021 DSL)* stipulates that, for example: (Available at https://www.chinalawtranslate.com/en/datasecuritylaw/)

31 See details in Cyber Security Guidance for International Travel (University of Southampton), which is available at Cyber Security Guidance for International Travel (sharepoint.com).

32 The promotion of the biodiversity of Yunnan Province including the Horti-expo garden has been circulated by media nationwide, such as *China Daily* (2022) https://govt.chinadaily.com.cn/s/202203/02/WS621edb1c498e6a12c12215ec/colorful-flowers-bloom-in-world-horti-expo-garden-in-kunming.html

33 An introduction of the Dai people in Yunnan and their culture is available at https://factsanddetails.com/china/cat5/sub31/entry-4397.html

34 *The Dai Show*: *Xishuangbanna in China* is available on https://dragone.com/shows/the-dai-show/.

35 See National Parks for an introduction of Bodhi Tree, available at https://www.nparks.gov.sg/gardens-parks-and-nature/heritage-trees/ht-2001-18

36 See the introduction of the Dai religion and festivals on Facts and Details, available at https://factsanddetails.com/china/cat5/sub31/entry-4398.html

37 See, for example, *Explore Yunnan's Wildlife Treasures* (2024) published by *China Daily*, which circulates this discourse. Available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202403/31/WS6608c600a31082fc043bf982_1.html.

38 It is available on the website of People's Government of Yunnan Province https://www.yn.gov.cn/yngk/szmp/pes/201902/t20190227_99294.html (in Chinese).

39 It is available at http://english.scio.gov.cn/chinafacts/node_7247636.htm.

40 The introduction article of the Dai people titled *Dai ethnic group* (2017) is available at http://english.scio.gov.cn/chinafacts/2017-04/17/content_40636321.htm.

41 The article is available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/m/dehong/2010-07/27/content_11055084.htm.

42 The webpage of this event is titled Elephants' wonderland, which is available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/special_coverage/60c2b194a31024ad0bac5094.

43 An article (in Chinese) published by the CPC Central Committee Bimonthly *Qiushi* 《求是》Journal in March, 2024, lists various sociopolitical agendas underpinned by the metaphor of pomegranate seeds to foster ethnic unity and progress nationwide, which is available at http://www.qstheory.cn/dukan/qs/2024-01/31/c_1130069353.htm.

44 See relevant regulations and articles published on the official website of the People's Government of Yunnan Province (https://www.yn.gov.cn/), such as https://www.yn.gov.cn/ywdt/zsdt/202312/t20231225_292405.html (2023) and https://www.yn.gov.cn/ywdt/ynyw/202402/t20240227_296003.html (2024) (in Chinese).

45 It is available on the official website of Ethnic and Religious Affairs Commission of Yunnan Province (in Chinese) https://mzzj.yn.gov.cn/html/2022/gongzuodongtai_0608/42954.html (June, 2022).

46 The reiterated metaphor for ethnic unity by President Xi Jinping from 2014 to 2021 was summarized in a published article (in Chinese) by CPC Central Committee Bimonthly *Qiushi* Journal, available at http://www.qstheory.cn/zhuanqu/2021-06/14/c_1127562883.htm.

47 In Kong's (2017, 2022) papers, Pan Ni's words are "千房同膜，十子如一" (Thousands of arils all share membranes, every ten seeds form a pocket). However, according to an article (in Chinese) published on 光明网 (http://www.gmw.cn/) sponsored by the CPC, the sentence in the poem is "十房同膜，千子如一" (see https://news.gmw.cn/2022-10/30/content_36123627.htm). By comparing with another adapted version of this poem sentence that has been widely circulated in the political discourses in China since President Xi Jinping's use of the pomegranate metaphor, that is "千房同膜，千子如一" (literally, thousands of chambers all share membranes, thousands of seeds are all alike), I adopt the version on 光明网, which makes more sense to me.

48 This article published by *China Daily* and titled “Xi leads ecological civilization” is available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2017-03/22/content_28634915.htm.

49 As early as 2005, when Xi Jinping, then as secretary of the Zhejiang Provincial Committee of the CPC, visited a village struggling to balance economic development and environmental protection, he said that “mountains and rivers green are mountains of silver and gold”, in order to call for efforts to strike a balance (*Xinhua*, 2021: n.p.). This article titled “Green is Gold” is published on the website of the National People’s Congress of the PRC (https://subsites.chinadaily.com.cn/npc/2021-04/22/c_693020.htm).

50 The political principle of governing a country, as advocated by Confucianism, is benevolence and righteousness, which is achieved though winning people’s support through virtue instead of by force. See the website of Key Concepts in Chinese Thought and Culture, which is available at https://www.chinesethought.cn/eN/shuyu_show.aspx?shuyu_id=2162.

51 The series of articles, titled *Development is still priority* to celebrate Deng Xiaoping’s 110th birthday, are available at https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-08/22/content_18466773.htm .The article titled *Why we still must adhere to ‘development is the hard truth’* (Jia Kang, 2023) is available at https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202312/1303911.shtml

52 This article, *Xi stresses development of new productive forces*: *high-quality development*, is published on the website of International Department, Central Committee of CPC, available at https://www.idcpc.gov.cn/english2023/ttxw_5749/202405/t20240515_163985.html#:~:text=Xi%20Jinping%2C%20general%20secretary%20of,principle%20in%20the%20new%20era.

53 The document is available on the official website of the Yunnan provincial government (in Chinese): https://www.yn.gov.cn/zwgk/zfxxgkpt/fdzdgknr/zcwj/zdgkwjyzf/202308/t20230825_284705.html

54 See the State Council Information Office (SCIO) briefing on taking solid steps to promote high quality development in Yunnan, 2024, which is available at http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/node_9008060.htm.

55 For example, Ministry of Culture and Tourism of the PRC https://www.mct.gov.cn/whzx/qgwhxxlb/yn/202310/t20231010_949032.htm
the Supreme People’s Procuratorate of the PRC https://www.spp.gov.cn/spp/zhuanlan/202407/t20240728_661727.shtml
China Travel News https://www.ctnews.com.cn/m/2023-10/10/content_150499.html

56 This article titled “Understanding high-quality development” is published on the website of *Beijing Review*, available at https://www.bjreview.com/Opinion/Voice/202405/t20240508_800365019.html.

57 This article is published by *China Daily*, with the title of "China's ethnic groups adopt unity, equality", which is available at https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/585799.

58 It is published by *Global Times*, titled "Unity in Diversity in Xinjiang". This speech is available at https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202406/1313986.shtml.

59 Wang Yubo, deputy secretary of the Communist Party of China Yunnan Provincial Committee and governor of Yunnan province, was a speaker at a press conference held by the State Council Information Office (SCIO) in May 2024, titled *SCIO briefing on taking solid steps to promote high quality development in Yunnan*. It is available at http://english.scio.gov.cn/pressroom/node_9008060.htm

60 This illustration (in Chinese) is available at https://www.yn.gov.cn/zwgk/zcjd/zcjdmdyn/202309/t20230918_285990.html

61 The article titled *Expanding population of wild Asian elephants in Yunnan are living symbols of China's ecological commitment* (2024) is available on *Global Times* https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202405/1312743.shtml