

Strangers, Sang for Me

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Strangers, Sang for Me is a two-part project that reflects on the shifting, mediated, and often contradictory representations of ethnic minorities in contemporary China. Comprising a sound installation and a video work, the project draws on field recordings and found footage from Chinese short video platforms such as Kuaishou and Douyin. It began with my personal inquiry into what it means to be Shui—a lesser-known ethnic minority—within a system that defines and distributes ethnicity in increasingly performative and commercialized ways.

Constructing “Ethnicity” in Contemporary China

The classification of 56 official ethnic groups (minzu 民族)—55 minority groups and the Han majority—is a product of the PRC’s post-1949 state-building project. Drawing from Soviet models and colonial-era ethnographic expeditions, this system aimed to consolidate a sense of national unity through the rhetoric of “ethnic diversity.” As Louisa Schein notes in *Minority Rules: The Miao and the Feminine in China's Cultural Politics*, the state-sponsored discourse of multiculturalism often masks deeper structures of inequality, objectification, and exoticization.

Ethnic minorities in China today are prominently featured in state narratives, tourism campaigns, and popular culture. In *A Landscape of Travel* (2014), Jenny Chio analyzes how ethnic tourism in Southwest China has transformed villages into performative spaces where “authenticity” is continuously produced and negotiated. Her work highlights the ways in which local villagers, often women, are both subjects and laborers of ethnic display.

In a similar vein, Xuefei Hu’s study *Using Intimacy as a Lens on the Work and Migration Experiences of Ethnic Performers in Southwest China* explores how performative labor—particularly within ethnic parks and tourist zones—relies on emotional and bodily intimacy, often at the cost of personal and cultural autonomy.

These works provide a framework to understand how ethnic representation is not simply a question of identity, but one of labor, gender, power, and media. The “minority” is a visual, performative, and commodified category—continuously produced for external consumption.

Personal Distance and the “Unknown Known”

I was born in Yunnan province, one of the most ethnically diverse regions in China. It is also one of the most heavily commodified in terms of “minority” tourism. Groups like the Bai, Dai, Yi, and Miao are regularly showcased in advertisements and travel brochures. By contrast, my own group—the Shui—is relatively unknown, despite being officially recognized.

Though I am registered as Shui in the national household system, my connection to the culture was entirely mediated: through booklets, museum displays, and school propaganda. I received bonus points in exams for being “minority,” yet I had no experiential connection to the traditions I was said to inherit. This dissonance haunted me: What does it mean to be part of something that I only know through its representation?

This question intensified during my time abroad, where I began looking at my own ethnic identity from afar—first with curiosity, then with disillusionment, and finally with a kind of grieving admiration. I was drawn to the beautiful silver accessories I saw in images online, only to realize

many of them were produced for performance, or even bought from mass-market platforms like the Chinese version of TEMU. I read folktales about the Shui written in “official” publications, and only later discovered through conversations that some of these stories were fabricated by tourism workers to meet market demands.

When I visited the Shui Autonomous County in Guizhou, I discovered that we had a spoken language—contrary to what I had been taught. I searched for Shui-language songs on Douyin and Kuaishou and found dozens of videos. I could only read the titles, which were written in Mandarin, and understood these songs were about their experiences being migrated workers, love, or even some most intimate subjects - the experiences from one-child policy when they were children, or their regrets in their lives. I messaged the content creators, asking what the lyrics meant. Their response: “We don’t know how to translate them into Mandarin.” Neither did I.

Working with Sound, Working with Not-Knowing

This moment—of hearing something I am supposed to understand but don’t—became the core of my project. I am not interested in translating Shui identity into a stable form. Instead, I want to share what it feels like to live among fragments: voices I can’t decipher, rituals I have never practiced, images that both attract and alienate.

In *Mediations of Presence*, scholars explore how presence—particularly in media—is always mediated, partial, and performative. My project uses sound and video to reflect this layered distance. I do not subtitle the songs, nor do I try to recreate a linear narrative. I let the voices exist as they are—untranslated, fragmented, resonant.

I also draw on the idea of intimacy—not as closeness, but as tension. In the essay *Using Intimacy as a Lens*, intimacy is proposed as a way to read labor and emotion in ethnic performance. I appropriate this lens for myself: How can I approach my own culture with intimacy, without assuming ownership or clarity?

Toward a Poetics of Uncertainty

Strangers, Sang for Me is not a search for authenticity. Rather, it is a documentation of confusion, longing, and distance. It is a space where fragments gather but don’t resolve. I do not claim to represent the Shui. My attempt is to express within the emotional resonance of what I cannot fully understand yet.

Citations:

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