Unveiling ethnic tourism imaginaries: A multimodal evaluation of Xizang Autonomous Region's Douyin promotions

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Abstract

Mobile social media platforms enable tourism destinations to project their tourism imaginaries to potential tourists. However, there remains a limited understanding of how these destinations use multimodal resources to communicate their imaginaries on social media. This study examines how the Department of Culture and Tourism of Xizang Autonomous Region utilizes Douyin to construct its tourism imaginaries. By integrating Wang and Feng's (2023) multimodal construction framework with Feng's (2023) system of visual evaluative connotations, a systematic semiotic framework was developed to analyze 340 short videos from Xizang's official tourism account. The analysis revealed seven evaluative attributes of Xizang's tourism imaginaries: abundant natural beauty, profound historical and cultural roots, authentic experiences, solid governmental support, holy healing land, exceptional hospitality, and unwavering environmental commitment. These imaginaries reflect the complex societal dynamics of "nèi juân" (involution) within China's unique socio-cultural landscape and are shaped by government policies and current consumer behaviour trends in the tourism market. The findings provide practical insights for marketing strategies and sustainable tourism development in Xizang and other ethnic destinations.

Keywords: Ethnic tourism imaginaries, multimodal discourse analysis, the Xizang Autonomous Region, mobile social media, branding.

Resumen

Análisis de los imaginarios del turismo étnico: una evaluación multimodal de la estrategia promocional de la Región Autónoma de Xizang en Douyin

Las plataformas de redes sociales permiten a los destinos turísticos proyectar sus imaginarios turísticos a potenciales turistas. Sin embargo, aún se comprende de manera limitada cómo estos destinos emplean recursos multimodales para comunicar sus imaginarios en las redes sociales. Este estudio analiza cómo el Departamento de Desarrollo Turístico de la Región Autónoma de Xizang utiliza Douyin para construir sus imaginarios turísticos. Para ello, se desarrolló un marco semiótico sistemático, integrando el modelo de construcción multimodal de Wang y Feng (2023) con el sistema de connotaciones visuales evaluativas de Feng (2023). Mediante el análisis de 340 vídeos cortos publicados en la cuenta oficial de turismo de Xizang, se identificaron siete atributos evaluativos en la construcción de sus imaginarios turísticos: abundante belleza natural, profundas raíces históricas y culturales, experiencias auténticas, sólido apoyo gubernamental, tierra sagrada sanadora, hospitalidad excepcional y un compromiso ambiental inquebrantable. Estos imaginarios reflejan las complejas dinámicas sociales de "nèi juân" (involución) dentro del paisaje sociocultural único de China y están moldeados por las políticas gubernamentales y las tendencias actuales de comportamiento del consumidor en el mercado turístico. Los hallazgos proporcionan perspectivas prácticas para estrategias de marketing y el desarrollo turístico sostenible en Xizang y otros destinos étnicos.

Palabras clave: Imaginarios del turismo étnico, análisis del discurso multimodal, Región Autónoma de Xizang, redes sociales móviles, *branding*.

1. Introduction

In today's digital era, social media platforms like Douyin (TikTok globally) have become central to tourism branding, renowned for their substantial influence on tourists' perceptions and actions (Du et al., 2022). This platform is favored for its ability to engage modern tourists and professionals alike, functioning as a vital medium for destination selection, experience sharing, and feedback reception (Feldkamp, 2021). For example, destinations in China are increasingly using Douyin to enhance their global competitiveness by projecting distinctive imaginaries (Wang & Feng, 2023). This trend has led to a surge in research focused on branding strategies in short videos and their impact on destination images (Wengel et al., 2022). Despite the popularity of social media in destination branding, so far, we have little knowledge about how destinations communicate their tourism

imaginaries as the unique selling point from a linguistic perspective. The notion of tourism imaginary is conceptualized to refer to a destination's identity, conveyed through specific images such as physical attractions designed to spark viewers' imaginations towards the destination (Salazar, 2012). It is crucial for differentiating destinations in a competitive market and for developing their symbolic economy (Wang & Feng, 2023).

The process of branding destinations' tourism imaginaries is essentially dialogue-oriented to persuade tourists to visit (Fernández-Vallejo, 2023a). As such, destination branding is considered a digital discursive practice, with a discourse-oriented approach widely adopted in related studies (De Bernardi, 2022; Wang & Feng, 2023). Advances in 5G technology have further shifted tourism discourse from traditional media to social media platforms characterized by multimodality and strategic communication (Jiang & Lim, 2022). Previous studies suggest the utility of multimodal discourse analysis in investigating destination branding (Cheng, 2016; Dolón Herrero, 2016). Nonetheless, there is a lack of understanding of how destinations communicate their tourism imaginaries through evaluative meanings in multimodal resources, particularly for ethnic minority destinations. This oversight emphasizes the need to explore the evaluative potentials of these resources (Feng, 2023; Martin & White, 2005). Our study addresses this by conducting a multimodal discourse analysis of Xizang Autonomous Region's tourism imaginaries projected in promotional videos on Douyin.

This study examines the lesser-explored ethnic minority destination of Xizang Autonomous Region in China (henceforth Xizang), generally referred to as "Tibet" in Western media. In line with the official toponym of the People's Republic of China, this paper uses the Pinyin term "Xizang". Renowned for its unique tourism resources, Xizang's tourism sector experienced a downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a year-on-year decline of 34.5% in total tourism revenue from 2020 to 2023, compared to ¥559.28 billion in 2019 (Xizang Autonomous Region Bureau of Statistics, 2023). In response, the Department of Culture and Tourism of Xizang Autonomous Region has proactively utilized social media platforms like Douyin to enhance its visibility and attract tourists. Against this backdrop, this study employs multimodal discourse analysis to explore how Xizang promotes itself on Douyin, providing new insights into ethnic tourism and offering practical suggestions for stakeholders involved in the sustainable development of ethnic tourism. Specifically, it analyzes how Xizang's imaginaries are constructed through the evaluative meanings conveyed in

verbal and visual resources. The multimodal discourse analysis approach allows for an in-depth exploration beyond mere content analysis, examining the "how" and "why" behind the communication of these imaginaries (Breeze & Fernández-Vallejo, 2020, forthcoming). Given that contexts influence discursive practices in the tourism field (Dolón Herrero, 2016), this study also explores socio-cultural and socio-political contexts and current tourist consumer behaviour to understand the reasons behind these imaginaries. The guiding research questions address the "what", "how", and "why" of Xizang's imaginaries:

1. What are Xizang's tourism imaginaries projected in its official Douyin videos?

2. How are these imaginaries realized by deploying verbal and visual semiotic resources?

3. What do the features of Xizang's tourism imaginaries reveal about China's socio-cultural and socio-political contexts and tourist consumer behaviour?

2. Literature review

2.1. The Xizang Autonomous Region

Xizang, situated on the Tibetan Plateau, is a province-level autonomous region under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China. It was established in 1965 and is one of the five provincial-level autonomous regions inhabited by ethnic minorities. Renowned as the "roof of the world", it is home to some of the highest elevations on earth, including Mount Everest. This region, known for its stunning mountain landscapes, vast plateaus, and deep valleys, supports diverse ecosystems with species, making Xizang a compelling destination that captivates global attention. The tourism growth in Xizang can be traced back to the Chinese government's initiation of the "Go West" campaign in 1999 (An, 2009). This campaign was designed to foster development in China's less privileged western regions. Subsequently, the construction of the Qingzang Railway in 2006 accelerated Xizang's tourism growth by improving accessibility. Xizang's tourism industry is a crucial contributor to the region's revenue. As illustrated in Figure 1, data from the Xizang Autonomous Region Bureau of Statistics (2023) shows that Xizang's tourism industry experienced a significant rise in tourist arrivals and revenue from 2008 to 2019.

Nevertheless, the lines from 2019 to 2022 display fluctuating growth and decline, illustrating their vulnerability to global disruptions such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, regarding the development and trends of Xizang's tourism, this study explores Xizang's discursive branding practices to offer strategic suggestions for practitioners aiming to attract more potential tourists.
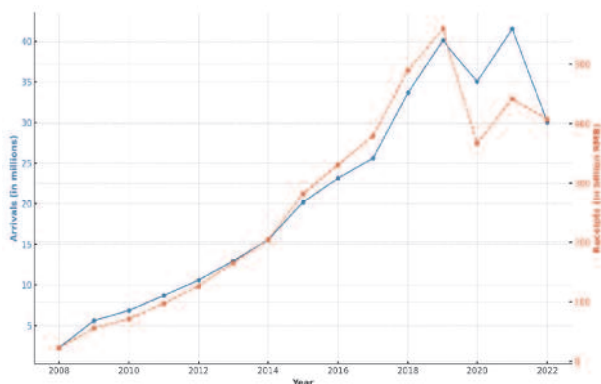

Figure 1. Tourist arrivals and revenue in Xizang, 2008-2022 [Source: compiled from data published by the Xizang Autonomous Region Bureau of Statistics (2023)].

2.2. Destination image and tourism imaginary

The concept of destination image usually comprises impressions, beliefs, ideas, and expectations tourists hold about a destination. It significantly impacts tourists' choices, satisfaction, engagement, and the competitiveness of destinations (Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2023). Existing studies have thoroughly explored destination image models, formations, scales, and evaluation methods (Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig, 2020; Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2023). Three primary components of destination image were identified: cognitive (tourists' perceptions of destination attributes), affective (emotional responses towards the destination), and conative (influence on the likelihood of visiting). From a supply-demand perspective, a study distinguished between the perceived image formed by tourists through personal experiences and the projected destination image crafted intentionally by the destination (Ferrer-Rosell & Marine-Roig, 2020). The perceived image, often evaluated via surveys or interviews to gauge tourists' cognitive and emotional reactions, is central to destination image studies.

However, the projected image, i.e., the imaginary, remains crucial. It is typically communicated through visual elements and functions as a pull factor. The projected image analysis often emphasizes the physical attributes of destinations through quantitative content analysis. For example, Siyamiyan Gorji et al. (2023) examined Iran's projected image on Instagram by categorizing photographs into 14 groups. They found that the leading attributes of Iran are its rich history and landscapes. While studies on destination images primarily focused on observable and measurable tourism attributes, destination tourism imaginary expands this concept to include the underlying symbolic and cultural meanings that images evoke (Salazar, 2012; Wang & Feng, 2023). Examining both the tangible attributes of a destination's image and the abstract aspects of its imaginaries offers a more holistic understanding of what the destination truly represents.

The projection of destination imaginary is considered an actual social practice that can be operationalized through market branding, wherein destinations are represented as spaces filled with various social constructs, including symbols, rhetoric, and semiotics (Zhao et al., 2018). In this process, tourists assume the role of receivers, with imaginaries crafted to shape and evoke their envisioned perceptions of a destination. Salazar (2012) suggests that exploring the 'imaginary' requires analyzing the channels through which they are manifested and represented. While existing studies have extensively explored the physical attributes of destination images (Siyamiyan Gorji et al., 2023), the more profound cultural ideology and identity reflected in destination imaginaries have not been considered, particularly in non-mainstream destinations. Studies like those by Wang and Feng (2023) primarily focus on mainstream destinations such as Xi'an, analyzing how this second-tier city in China projects modern and historical urban imaginaries in promotional videos on TikTok. However, destinations with distinctive ethnic characteristics, mainly ethnic minority areas, are often overlooked. Our study shifts focus to an ethnic region in China, a country that is home to 55 ethnic minorities and the Han majority. This provides a fresh perspective that is often missing in mainstream destination research. Since many of these areas are economically underdeveloped, tourism has emerged as a vital economic lifeline. For instance, in Xizang, tourism accounted for 27.23% of the GDP in 2023 (Xizang Autonomous Region Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Examining Xizang's tourism imaginaries hopes to provide more implications for promoting tourism in other similar ethnic minority regions.

2.3. Tourism discourse studies

The last decade has witnessed an expansion in the integration of discourse and semiotic analysis into tourism studies. Initially, studies focused on traditional media, including brochures (De Bernardi, 2022) and websites (Fernández-Vallejo, 2023b). With the advent of the 5G mobile network era, studies show that places worldwide are mobilizing multimodal resources to brand themselves (Wang & Feng, 2023). This shift has sparked a growing interest in multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) within tourism studies. For instance, Jabeen et al. (2022) demonstrated the effective integration of multimodal resources in presenting Saudi Arabia as a modern, multicultural destination. Furthermore, studies have noted the prominence of evaluative potentials within tourism discourse (Cheng, 2016). This trend is particularly evident in several studies (Smirnova, 2022; Wu, 2018) examining the appraisal language and features in tourism discourse by employing appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005). For example, Wu (2018) analyzed the use of appraisal language on Hangzhou's and London's tourism websites and showed its role in constructing distinct identities for international audiences. Smirnova (2022) reviewed hotel feedback on Booking.com and revealed how evaluative language shapes hotel identities. These studies focused primarily on verbal evaluation, particularly the use of attitudinal adjectives and adjectival phrases to construct brands and engage potential tourists or customers (Suau-Jiménez, 2019). While visuals are recognized as necessary and powerful communicative tools that can enhance the effectiveness of information dissemination (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) and affect how destinations are viewed (Palmer-Silveira, 2019), their evaluative potential is rarely explored. Notably, Feng (2023) provides a rare insight into how visuals in promotional films can shape China's national images, suggesting a need for more comprehensive studies in this area. Given this gap, the study investigates the complex multimodal discourse of mobile media videos, particularly those representing ethnic tourism destinations. While previous studies on ethnic regions have extensively covered themes like minority empowerment (Asham et al., 2022) and representation of ethnic groups (De Bernardi, 2022), the representation of ethnic minority destinations and their associated tourism imaginaries is less explored. Therefore, this study uses contemporary semiotic frameworks, especially those developed by Wang and Feng (2023) and Feng (2023), to explore the evaluative potential of verbal and visual semiotic resources in representing ethnic destinations, such as in Xizang.

3. Method

3.1. Data collection

This study examines the branding of Xizang on social media, with a particular focus on Douyin. Douyin was chosen for its vast reach, with more than 600 million daily users, and its influential role in promoting ethnic minorities and their cultures (Chen & Gong, 2025). A total of 340 videos published by Xizang's official account for tourism branding were collected, spanning from December 1, 2022, to September 30, 2023. Those videos are public and retrievable. During this period, Xizang witnessed a substantial uptick in tourism, with 49.67 million visitors contributing to tourism revenue of 59.398 billion yuan – a 46.2% increase from the previous year. This growth coincided with China's easing of epidemic-related mobility restrictions and offered a comprehensive view of Xizang's self-promotion and image construction. These videos amount to 3 hours, 11 minutes, and 36 seconds of content. Two datasets were processed. The first dataset comprised verbal resources, including video captions, voice-overs, and copywriting, amounting to a total of 24,015 words. The second dataset focused on visual resources; approximately 1,420 keyframes were extracted from various scenes within the videos using Adobe Premiere Pro 2021. The purpose of visual frame extraction was to identify instances where multiple Xizang's imaginaries were concurrently constructed across different scenes within the same video.

3.2. Data analysis

Destination tourism imaginaries are contextually dependent; thus, this study considers them as a set of evaluative attributes realized through verbal and visual resources on the one hand and shaped by the broader socio-cultural context on the other hand (Wang & Feng, 2023). Therefore, the analysis is structured into three phases: identifying Xizang's tourism imaginaries, elucidating their multimodal realizations, and explaining the contextual factors that shape them (see Figure 2). Phase 1 was concurrently carried out with Phase 2, as Xizang's imaginaries are not fixed labels; they are meaningfully constructed by verbal and visual resources.
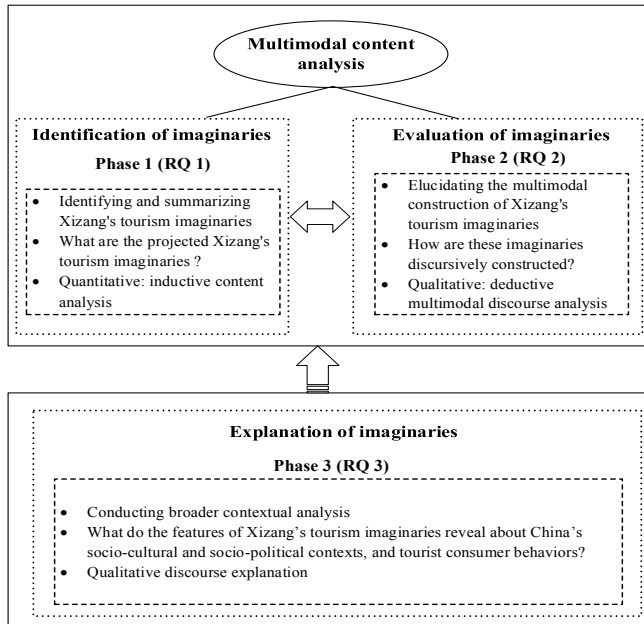
Figure 2. Analytical model: A multimodal content analysis of tourism imaginaries [Source: created by the authors].

Our study applied a social semiotics-inspired multimodal content analysis method (Serafini & Reid, 2023; Wang & Feng, 2022) across Phases 1 and 2 to analyze Xizang's imaginaries in videos. This method combines qualitative discourse analysis with quantitative frequency counts, enabling us to discern salient features and typical cases for detailed examination. In this way, the results are designed to be generalizable and nuanced. Phase 1 involved an inductive content analysis, where categories were directly derived from a close analysis of the data. The two authors collaboratively analyzed the videos, identifying core categories of Xizang's imaginaries through iterative and reflexive discussions. Phase 2 was deductive, utilizing a systematic framework developed based on Wang and Feng (2023) and Feng (2023). This framework, detailed in Section 3.2.1, functioned as a coding scheme to address multimodal meaning-making processes in the videos. Phase 3 expanded the study to include a qualitative explanation of how Xizang's discursive branding practices and imaginaries are contextualized within contemporary China's broader socio-cultural and socio-political contexts. Moreover, tourist consumer behaviour (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2020) was also considered because they mirror tourists' needs and preferences, as well

as market trends and consumption dynamics. These elements collectively influence the shaping and promotion of Xizang's digital brand practice. Recent studies have used similar research methodologies, such as the exploration of "Green China" through eco-documentaries (Wang et al., 2023) and analysis of Chinese "wanghong" (online influencer) women's identity in TikTok videos (Wang & Feng, 2022). These studies demonstrate the effectiveness of multimodal content analysis in deciphering evaluative meaning construction mechanisms in the destination's discursive practice.

3.2.1. Analytical framework

To address the complexity of evaluative meaning construction, a multimodal framework was adapted from the studies of Wang and Feng (2023) and Feng (2023). Wang and Feng's investigation into Xi'an's digitalized urban imaginary on TikTok developed a framework that details Xi'an's imaginaries, which are realized either through verbal articulation or visual embedding. Their visual analysis tends to focus on superficial depiction rather than sufficiently analyzing how visual resources convey evaluative meanings. In complement to this, Feng's (2023) study on promoting China's national image in films reveals how visual semiotic resources can generate evaluative connotations. Given the insights the two studies provided, this study integrated both semiotic frameworks. As illustrated in Figure 3, the framework intends to map out articulated imaginaries (expressed verbally) and embedded imaginaries (depicted visually). It also helps code the videos to analyze prominent features and distribution of Xizang's tourism imaginaries. Explicit evaluation involves using attitudinal lexis, such as "beautiful" and "splendid", and metaphors. Conversely, implicit evaluations are invoked through the narrative recounting facts or events designed to elicit evaluative responses. For example, instead of making an explicit statement such as "Xizang is endowed with vast natural resources", the video provides a detailed exposition of the various elements constituting Xizang's abundant natural resources, which functioned as the eliciting condition. Further, phrases like "I will bring my family here next time", found in the analyzed video, act as the resultant action. These expressions subtly suggest that Xizang is an appealing destination without directly stating its attractions. Xizang's imaginaries can also be implicitly elicited through the evaluative connotations inherent in visual resources (Feng, 2023). These visual connotations present four distinctive options: entail, provoke, flag, and afford. In the context of "entail" choice, the evaluative attribute is firmly conventionalized, offering minimal opportunity for alternative

interpretations. This choice typically manifests through facial expressions, emblematic gestures, and symbolic objects. In "provoke" choice, akin to generating evaluative attributes through verbal metaphors, visual metaphors can also elicit evaluative attributes and evoke the viewers' imagination (Fernández-Vallejo, 2023b). Two cinematic metaphor options are employed, and comparing visual shots can also incorporate evaluative attributes (Feng, 2023). The third option, "flag", can integrate evaluative attributes into visual resources. This is an expansion of the graduation resources typically seen in verbal contexts. It has three categories: quantity, proximity, and distribution. The final option, "afford", encompasses the evaluative attributes embedded in the visual representations, including depictions of characters, sceneries, and events. Character depiction can be categorized into actional and analytical processes (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020). The actional process pertains to a character's activities in videos, such as dancing, conversing, or climbing. The analytical process encompasses elements that contribute to an individual's overall identity, encompassing facial features, attire, accessories, and other "possessions". The sceneries refer to Xizang's scenic attractions, encompassing sacred mountains, historical sites, and more. The event pertains to activities or conferences conducted within Xizang to promote its tourism. Take Figure 4 as an example to see how the four visual strategies illustrate Xizang's imaginary as a haven of warmth and hospitality.
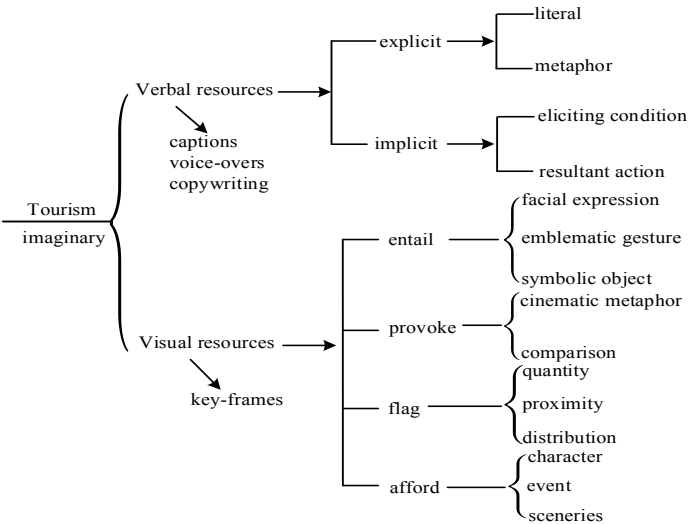

Figure 3. Component framework design for multimodal evaluation of Xizang's tourism imaginaries [Source: developed from Wang and Feng's (2023) and Feng's (2023) frameworks].

The proposed framework was used to code all 340 short videos, each video being the unit of analysis. An evaluative imaginary was annotated when constructed through verbal texts or visual keyframes. When multiple imaginaries were simultaneously constructed in a single video, all were counted. Cases where a single utterance or keyframe constructed multiple imaginaries were also recorded. Thus, the total number of evaluative imaginaries recorded exceeds the number of videos analyzed. To ensure coding accuracy, we implemented both intra-coder and inter-coder reliability measures. Two authors independently coded all the videos. One author coded the videos twice, with a two-month interval between sessions. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, and the ReCal2 reliability calculator assessed an inter-coder reliability rate above 90%.

Figure 4. Visual construction of evaluative meanings in tourism promotion [Source: the image was obtained from Douyin and annotated by the authors].

4. Results and discussion

This section deals with the analysis of Xizang's tourism imaginaries identified in the dataset (Section 4.1). Insightful multimodal evaluation of the identified tourism imaginaries, as well as contextual explanation, are shown and discussed in Sections 4.2 and 4.3, respectively.

4.1. Inductive identification of Xizang's tourism imaginaries

We identified seven tourism imaginaries of Xizang from 340 Douyin videos. They are outlined in Table 1, along with their corresponding tourism attributes.

Xizang's tourism imaginaries	Frequency	% of cases	Tourism attributes
A region with rich natural resources	249	73.23%	Spectacular mountains, pristine leaks, bio-diverse Alpine flora and fauna, mystical meteorological landscape, vast grasslands, glacier terrains, hot springs, canyons, and others
A historical region with a rich cultural heritage	115	33.82%	Indigenous customs and traditions, ancient landmarks, ancient trade routes, cultural festivals and celebrations, artistic and architectural heritage, museums and cultural centers, traditional clothing, traditional handicrafts and artisans, cultural performances, nomadic lifestyles, and others
An authentic and engaging destination for visitors	95	27.94%	Adventure seeker's haven, photography enthusiast's haven, local markets and bazaars extravaganza, Astro-Tourism delight, Xizang's cuisine exploration, festival celebrations spectacle, nomadic encounters, self-guided tour experience, chic accommodation, fun recreational activity, diverse infrastructure, interactive technology experience, and others
A region governed by the robust Chinese government dedicated to Xizang's people	50	14.70%	Successful political reform, economic growth, poverty reduction efforts, infrastructure enhancement, cultural and environmental conservation, ethnic unity and social harmony, sustainable tourism, and others
A holy and healing land	36	10.59%	Xizang Buddhism, Xizang Buddhist rituals and sacred objects, majestic mountains, serene lakes and rivers, renowned temples and palatial wonders, extensive scripture library, peaceful meditation and retreats, mysterious atmosphere, modern life escape, personal self-discovery, and growth, inner peace, natural connection, cultural immersion, and others
A haven of warmth and hospitality	23	6.76%	Traditional Hada greetings, genuine locals' smiles, culinary invitations, local dance engagement, excellent service commitment, festival and celebration invitations, heartfelt gestures, and others
An eco-responsible destination committed to environmental sustainability	11	3.24%	Protected natural areas, biodiversity conservation, eco-friendly tourism practices, comprehensive policy and regulation, and others

Table 1. Distribution of Xizang's tourism imaginaries and corresponding tourism attributes
[Source: created by the authors].

Predominantly, Xizang is presented as a region abundant in natural resources (73.23%), which aligns with its ecological richness. Cultural heritage is also a significant focus, with 33.82% of videos displaying Xizang's rich history and traditions. Xizang is also depicted as an engaging destination in 27.9% of the videos by emphasizing its authenticity and the depth of the visitor experience. Furthermore, 14.70% of the videos illustrate Xizang's progress and stability under the governance of the Chinese government, which reassures potential visitors of a safe environment. Holiness and serenity are presented in 10.59% of the content by showcasing Xizang Buddhism and its restorative characteristics. Lastly, the videos also present Xizang's commitment to environmental sustainability and hospitality, depicted in 3.24% and 6.76% of the cases, respectively. These imaginaries collaboratively crafted multifaceted Xizang to attract more potential tourists.

Understanding Xizang's branding within broader regional and international tourism contexts, we can see Xizang highlights both its natural and cultural heritage, reflecting trends seen in other minority regions like Yunnan, which is celebrated for its diverse landscapes and cultural richness (Qu et al., 2023). Internationally, like the Sámi often portrayed through exoticism in marketing materials (De Bernardi, 2022), Xizang also promotes its unique mystical and cultural elements. However, Xizang sidesteps the pitfalls of exoticization by presenting multifaceted imaginaries that include modernization, hospitality, and sustainability to attract tourists. Notably, Xizang showcases its stability and progress under the governance of the Chinese government, similar to the governance focus observed in Asham et al.'s study (2022), which explores the impact of government policies on the identity and livelihoods of Siwan minority communities. Unlike the disempowerment seen in Siwa, Xizang emphasizes empowerment and development, aligning with Fraser's (2020) findings on the Orochen in northeast China. His study highlights how the local Orochen communities leverage their heritage for self-driven development, suggesting a need for increased governance involvement. This analysis demonstrates how different cultural and political contexts shape the promotional strategies of ethnic regions, with each uniquely adapting to broader tourism trends.

4.2. Multimodal evaluation of Xizang's tourism imaginaries

4.2.1. Natural beauty and bounty

Xizang's natural beauty is marked by its abundant resources and breathtaking landscapes. These landscapes showcase a rich biological diversity, which includes snow-capped mountains, diverse flora and fauna, pristine lakes, unique meteorological phenomena, and ancient glacial wonders. These tourism attributes present Xizang as a prime tourist destination. Its natural beauty is highlighted in 249 videos using positive descriptors like "world-class scenery" and "vast wilderness". Concurrently, compared with destinations' attractions that were represented directly (Wu, 2018), Xizang employs dynamic and sensory-rich expressions to engage potential tourists actively. For example, the description of scenery in example (1) immerses viewers in the scenic beauty, bringing their fantasy to life.

> (1) By the lakeside, quietly awaiting a sunset, as the sunset gradually paints the Namunani Peak with red, a cascade of golden light pours onto the lake surface, as if time has frozen in such vastness and tranquility.

Meanwhile, Xizang's rich natural resources are *afforded* in 249 videos. As shown in Figure 5, lush flora in the foreground reflects the region's biodiversity. At the same time, mist-shrouded mountains demonstrate its diverse terrains. Besides, the close-up depiction of expansive watercourses, pristine glaciers, untouched lakes, remote wilderness, flora, and fauna all *flag* Xizang's abundant nature. Overall, Xizang uses evocative language and compelling visuals to represent it as a destination of abundant natural wonders to attract potential tourists.

Figure 5. Screenshot depicting Xizang's abundant natural beauty. Source: Douyin platform.

4.2.2. History and heritage

Presenting historical and cultural artistry is a common strategy in destination branding (Saeedi & Heidarzadeh Hanzaee, 2018). In Xizang, history and heritage define its identity, as evidenced by 115 videos. These videos offer glimpses into ancient sites, historic trade routes, traditional arts, and cultural heritage alongside the narratives of Xizang's emancipation and development. Specific historical narratives and heroic epics act as the *eliciting condition* to convey Xizang's history implicitly. Events such as the anti-British resistance and tributes to figures like Princess Wencheng[1] were covered. The portrayal of these historical figures in videos highlights Xizang's rich historical legacies, potentially evoking a deep sense of connection and ethnic pride among Chinese tourists. It also allows viewers to appreciate the region's cultural richness and historical beauty (Chen & Gong, 2025). Visually, emblematic historical landmarks like the Potala Palace and the Norbulingka Palace are featured, *entailing* Xizang's historical heritage. Furthermore, Xizang skillfully integrates ancient Chinese poems and proverbs with visual

representations of local activities and craftsmanship. For example, the verbal text (2) describes the traditional salt production process, where seawater is evaporated to leave brine, which is then boiled to produce salt. These verbal and visual resources reflect people's respect for nature and the complex richness of Xizang's culture.

> (2) Salt fields were watered in the morning, and sand fields were harvested in the evening.

At the same time, the visual depictions lyrically *afford* Xizang's traditional agricultural culture, showcasing the people's harmonious relationship with nature. This offers tourists an alluring and peaceful respite from their daily hustle and bustle. For instance, Figure 6 recontextualizes people's activities, showing locals engrossed in their work amidst the fields. Furthermore, the foreground is adorned with peach blossoms. It *entails* a layer of romantic and idyllic charm to depict life there.

Figure 6. Screenshot depicting people engaged in agricultural work. Source: Douyin platform.

Likewise, Xizang's artistic diversity is *afforded* in the videos that present its rich heritage in traditional arts, including Thangka painting, sculpture, and murals, as well as the rhythmic grace of music and Guozhuang dance (Ren, 2021). Furthermore, the intricate craftsmanship in Xizang's attire and jewelry in videos, coupled with the awe-inspiring architecture of temples and residences, conveys and *flags* Xizang's rich artistic traditions.

4.2.3. Authenticity and appeal

The appeal of exploring Xizang lies in its authentic and unspoiled experiences, which are evident in various activities ranging from adventure sports to cultural celebrations and unique culinary experiences. Meanwhile, featured videos demonstrate how modern amenities enhance Xizang's appeal by integrating ancient traditions with contemporary conveniences such as upscale accommodations, advanced infrastructure, and interactive technology, ensuring a memorable journey. Notably, 27.94% of the videos prominently feature tourists as the main active agents. They engage in self-guided tours, ascents of Mount Everest, photography sessions, and visits to landmarks like the Xizang Natural Science Museum. For instance, Figure 7 shows a group of climbers equipped with uniform gear ascending Lhodui Peak, illustrating the homogenized image of tourists as adventure seekers. Such a scene *entailed* Xizang's allure that can provide an authentic experience for viewers. Verbal resources are also used to reinforce its imaginary as an engaging destination. Example (3) uses invitational language to describe Xizang's diverse activities. It sparks an adventurous spirit and builds anticipation among viewers to explore its vast experiences and natural wonders.

(3) Let us go! All the third-pole sceneries and activities you can think of are here, except for the ocean.

Figure 7. A screenshot shows climbers equipped with gear ascending Lhodui Peak. Source: Douyin platform.

4.2.4. Governance and guardianship

In China, the governance of ethnic minority autonomous regions like Xizang is led by the Communist Party of China (CPC), which prioritizes

local interests and regional development (Xi, 2022). 50 videos depict themes like ethnic unity, socioeconomic progress, improvements in living standards, public services, poverty reduction, and cultural and ecological conservation efforts. For example, Figure 8 features the Qinghai-Xizang Highway's Amdo Highway Maintenance Section 109, dubbed the Premier Highway of the World. This scene depicted the fluttering Chinese five-starred red flag enduring harsh weather conditions. It *entails* the CPC's commitment to infrastructure construction in Xizang's challenging environments. Besides, the CPC's positive image is also *afforded* through depictions of significant events that boost Xizang's tourism industry, such as the Nyingchi Peach Blossom Festival and the Xizang Sub-Venue for China Tourism Day. Moreover, some visuals contrast the hardships of Xizang's agrarian serfdom era with the current contentment of its people. Such unfavorable comparisons emphasize the impact of the Democratic Reforms led by the CPC and *provoke* its responsible leadership and governance. This observation aligns with Liu and Li's (2023) findings on another ethnic autonomous region in China, Xinjiang, where multimodal metaphors, including transportation and light, are employed to emphasize the CPC's role in helping regional development and ethnic unity.

Figure 8. Screenshot of the world's highest-altitude highway maintenance section. Source: Douyin platform.

Interestingly, the imaginary of CPC's responsible governance is less expressed in verbal discourse. Merely one video has directly showcased the CPC's endeavors in improving the locals' well-being. Example (4) uses the adjective "tireless" to emphasize the CPC's continuous efforts, employing metaphors like "clouds" to depict challenges and "lights on the ground" to symbolize innovation. Phrases such as "the distant outlines" and "the smiles

on the people's faces" metaphorically represent the CPC's aspirations and achievements, underscoring their commitment to the community's welfare.

(4) If the clouds obscure the stars in the sky, let the lights on the ground serve as their substitute. The ceaseless tapping in the office signifies unrelenting efforts day and night. These efforts find their true value only when distant horizons become defined and smiles appear on people's faces. This embodies the tireless pursuit of generations of Communists.

4.2.5. Holiness and healing

Xizang, renowned for its holiness, is a good place for spiritual healing and renewal. On the one hand, its deep religious heritage, marked by Buddhism, pristine landscapes, and sacred rituals and relics, instills a profound sense of holiness. On the other hand, Xizang's tranquil atmosphere is a sanctuary for spiritual renewal. It offers a serene environment for individuals to reconnect with their inner selves and nature. Xizang's dual allures are *entailed* through narrative emblematic activities such as meditative sitting, reverential hand clasping, pilgrimage prostrations, and hanging prayer flags. Besides, symbolic and frequent representations like prayer wheels, Mani stone piles, and the iconic Potala Palace further *flag* and *entail* Xizang's holiness. The holy and healing imaginary of Xizang is also articulated. As seen in example (5), abstract adjectives like "spiritual" and "faithful" reveal Xizang's sacredness, illustrating a non-material spiritual pursuit coupled with the potency of religious belief. The description showcases Xizang's natural beauty and alludes to the spiritual elevation and rejuvenation tourists may experience.

(5) A spiritual journey, witnessing the faithful power. A trip soaking in the view of the celestial lake provides me with immensely fulfilling and pleasant moments, becoming memories worth cherishing for a lifetime.

4.2.6. Tourism-friendliness and togetherness

The imaginary of tourism-friendliness and togetherness means that Xizang is a hospitable destination that encourages unity between tourists and locals. As evidenced in 23 videos, Xizang offers a welcoming environment with good infrastructure and dedicated service. The locals' warm greetings further emphasize its hospitality. Furthermore, "togetherness" focuses on interactive experiences, where tourists engage in local dances, festival

invitations, and culinary explorations. Such narrative visual depictions demonstrate Xizang's friendliness, inclusiveness, and unity.

This imaginary is *afforded* by scenes of traditional ceremonies, mainly when locals present visitors with a "Hada" - a silk scarf symbolizing respect, friendliness, and good wishes (Liu & Fu, 2019). Offering a "Hada" is a meaningful welcome and a sign of honor deeply rooted in Xizang's culture. As illustrated in Figure 9, it is recontextualized through characters embodying analytical and actional processes. Analytically, the maiden's traditional attire and accessories show her local identity. Her sincere smile *entails* the genuine hospitality of the locals and directly conveys their joyful emotions. Moreover, presenting a Hada, complemented by her direct gaze, establishes a warm and inviting connection. This visual-spatial representation enhances the emotional impact of the invitation (Palmer-Silveira, 2019). The scene's warm hues and the striking combination of the yellow Hada and the maiden's clothing amplify the visual sense of warmth, capturing the essence of Xizang's hospitality.

Figure 9. Screenshot of a Xizang maiden presenting a Hada. Source: Douyin platform.

Verbal expressions further affirm the locals' warmth. Positive adjectives like "warm service" and phrases like "Xizang people are incredibly passionate" explicitly convey this. Besides, a staff member's poetic comparison, "let guests experience our people's warmth and hospitality, akin to sunshine", metaphorically equates local warmth with sunshine. Implicitly, expressions of contentment and the desire to return to Xizang are the *resultant actions* of the genuine hospitality of the local community, as seen in sentiments like "we find ourselves even happier here" and "we would like to visit again next

time". Furthermore, the frequent use of the traditional Xizang greeting, "Tashi Delek", which signifies good fortune, further coveys the welcoming nature of locals.

4.2.7. Ecological sustainability

Xizang demonstrates its commitment to ecological sustainability in 11 videos. Its eco-conscious initiatives are displayed, which include establishing ecological protection zones, preserving biodiversity, and promoting eco-friendly tourism practices like setting visitor limits and regulating hiking activities. Such depictions *entail* Xizang's sustainability efforts and regulations, showcasing the region's proactive stance on ecological balance and sustainable tourism. Visually, the region's dedication to environmental conservation is *afforded* and *entailed* through depicting pristine natural settings. For example, Figure 10 depicts two black-necked cranes against the backdrop of an unblemished lake that reflects the sky and mountains. Such a scene symbolizes Xizang's rich biodiversity and successful water resource management.

Figure 10. Screenshot highlighting black-necked cranes and pristine waters. Source: Douyin platform.

Concurrently, this commitment is conveyed verbally in two videos discussing sustainable tourism and environmental protection. Example (6), for instance, emphasizes the economic value of ecological assets by metaphorically describing the natural environment as "gold and silver mountains". The use of "tireless" explicitly emphasizes the community's enduring dedication to these practices. Concrete figures, such as "23,000 acres" and "31.94% forest coverage", further substantiate this commitment. Thus, Xizang stands as an

unwavering proponent of ecological guardianship, integrating conservation with sustainable development. These initiatives present local actions that are integral to a broader national strategy, showcasing China's dedication to environmental conservation and sustainable development (Wang et al., 2023).

(6) Ecological and economic harmony is a win-win, turning green waters and lush mountains into gold and silver mountains. The people of Dazi understand this principle well and tirelessly strive towards it. The soil in Dazi is thin, with abundant rocky terrain, making it unsuitable for natural tree growth. However, we transport soil to the mountains and carefully select the best saplings. Over the years, we have planted trees and created forests covering 23,000 acres, raising Dazi's forest coverage to 31.94%.

4.3. Contextual explanation of Xizang's tourism imaginaries

As mentioned earlier, the construction of Xizang's imaginaries is context-dependent. Thus, this section explores the dialectical relationship between the discursive construction of Xizang's imaginaries in Douyin videos and their reflection and shaping by reality. Our analysis is set in the specific socio-cultural and sociopolitical contexts of contemporary China (Wang et al., 2023; Wang & Feng, 2023) and is further shaped by the prevailing consumer behaviour trends in the tourism market (Horner & Swarbrooke, 2020).

The analysis reveals that Xizang distinctly emphasizes its natural and spiritual resources, unlike the commercial tactics employed in other ethnic minority regions. For instance, the Maasai Mara in Kenya promotes luxury accommodations and exclusive experiences (Bhandari, 2014). Specifically, 73.23% of the videos present Xizang's natural landscapes, while 10.59% focus on its sacred and healing attributes. Such presentation offers a respite from the excessive modernization and materialism that pervades today's societies (Gatersleben et al., 2018). Such promotional choice mirrors the rapid economic changes globally and responds to the growing backlash against the fast pace of urban life in China. Alongside growing, where material life is gradually enriched, there is an increasing desire for spiritual fulfillment (Zheng et al., 2023) and harmonious coexistence with nature due to its therapeutic qualities (Bratman et al., 2015). This need is particularly evident in the rise of the "nèi juân" (involution) phenomenon, which illustrates the intense societal pressures of modern society. The term means the relentless competition cycles where substantial effort yields minimal

gains. According to Weibo, "nèi juân" was one of the top ten buzzwords in China for 2020[2], attracting over 550 million views on Zhihu[3]. It symbolizes societal fatigue, constant competition, and a burgeoning desire to escape it. In response, the philosophy of "tâng píng" (lying flat) advocating a withdrawal from societal pressures for a more relaxed lifestyle emerged as one of China's top buzzwords in 2021[4]. In this cultural milieu, individuals increasingly seek sanctuaries offering tranquility away from urban chaos. Xizang leverages its unique capital to meet these needs. It positions itself as a pristine, spiritual destination by promoting its untouched landscapes and rich religious heritage. Such imaginary is further reinforced by minimizing human presence in the natural environment in videos, which amplifies viewers' perception of purity, tranquility, and healing potential. Thus, Xizang becomes a spiritual haven from everyday urban life, tapping into the cultural and spiritual aspirations that are increasingly prevalent among modern Chinese citizens.

Xizang's unique imaginaries are both shaped by and reflective of China's broader political agenda and government policies (Chen & Gong, 2025; Xi, 2022). This connection is clearly illustrated in videos that frequently feature government staff and convey the strategic political directives of the Chinese President. These directives focus on themes such as promoting ecological initiatives, advancing cultural confidence, strengthening national unity and ethnic solidarity, and showing the central government's strong support for Xizang. For instance, the studied videos feature the President's call to action, "green waters and green mountains are gold and silver mountains" (Huang, 2021), which advocates for environmental preservation. This call symbolically underscores the government's commitment to balancing economic growth with ecological sustainability. This strategic messaging reflects the core principles discussed during the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China (Xi, 2022), where the President stressed the imperative for green development and promoting harmony between humans and nature. Moreover, approximately 33.82% of the promotional videos emphasize Xizang's unique cultural elements, integrating them as an integral part of the broader Chinese cultural identity. This strategic emphasis extends beyond mere diversity. It is a deliberate strategy to bolster national identity and cohesion through a shared cultural heritage. Such representation illustrates China's strategy of building soft power by advancing "cultural confidence and self-strength" (Xi, 2022). Promotional efforts also feature excerpts from speeches by the Chinese President, where symbolic imagery

and phrases, especially his metaphor of diverse ethnicities as the unified seeds of a pomegranate, represent ethnic unity and harmony in China (Wei, 2023). In addition, the unwavering support from the Chinese central government for Xizang's tourism sector is conveyed through these videos, which are demonstrated by significant investments in tourism infrastructure. The visual depiction of improved railway infrastructure displays the government's dedication to boosting Xizang's tourism development by enhancing its tourist accessibility. Such dedication further reflects the strategic importance of Xizang in China's national development plans.

The data analysis also indicates that the projection and construction of Xizang's tourism imaginaries both follow and reflect evolving consumer behaviour trends in the tourism market. Modern Chinese society is witnessing a shift among tourists towards personalized and unique experiences. According to the 2023 China Travel Consumer Trends White Paper (Wang, 2023), there is a significant move from mass to niche tourism, characterized by a desire for "personalization", "exclusivity", and "Instagrammability", which are emerging as critical motivators for travel decisions. These trends are especially prominent among younger travelers seeking high-quality, customized experiences that offer exploration and deep cultural immersion (Kim & Chen, 2019). Xizang's marketing strategies have been adeptly aligned with these preferences. The region's unique natural resources, exotic charm, and diverse and authentic experiences cater well to these evolving consumer expectations. Moreover, a global trend towards sustainability and responsible travel resonates well with the Chinese travel community's growing preference for destinations that prioritize ecological preservation. Concerns about health and safety are increasingly crucial in travel planning, which leads tourists to select destinations that prioritize these aspects (Zou & Meng, 2020). Xizang has adapted its marketing strategies to promote the region's commitment to environmental conservation and showcase its governance under the central Chinese government's safety oversight. Xizang continually reinvents its destination imaginaries by proactively adapting to these shifts in modern travelers' preferences. This approach is essential to ensure that it remains relevant and desirable in a competitive global market.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, this study investigates the promotional discursive practices of Xizang, an ethnic minority destination, on social media. It identifies and interprets seven tourism imaginaries of Xizang through the evaluative potential of verbal and visual resources. These imaginaries are contextualized within the contemporary socio-cultural and socio-political background of China. They cater to a societal shift towards tranquility and simplicity, mirroring trends like "nèi juân" that emphasize retreating from urban chaos. Furthermore, these imaginaries align with government directives promoting ecological conservation, cultural confidence, and national unity and adapt to evolving tourist demands for personalized, exclusive, and Instagrammable experiences. These imaginaries not only play a crucial role in constructing Xizang's unique identity (Cheng, 2016) but also position it as an attractive destination for both domestic and international tourists. They offer potential tourists a virtual, immersive sensory experience, acting as a metaphorical substitute for direct interaction with the locale and its cultural practices (Wu & Cheong, 2022). This strategic use of virtual experiences has proven to be an effective branding tool (Valeiras-Jurado & Ruiz-Madrid, 2023), as it creates a compelling version of reality that enhances Xizang's appeal and contributes significantly to its symbolic economy (Wang & Feng, 2023).

Xizang's discursive practices have implications for other ethnic minority tourism destinations, aiming to enhance their visibility. First, in an era of technological advancement, these destinations should leverage social media platforms to increase visibility (Gebreel & Shuayb, 2022). Second, emphasizing the unique cultural capitals of ethnic minorities can help provide tourists with distinctive experiences and prevent the homogenization commonly seen in tourism marketing. Moreover, as societal preferences shift, tourism promotions should aim for universal appeal by promoting inclusivity across all age groups. Approximately 80% of the videos analyzed target young people by featuring young tourists and showcasing imaginaries specifically designed to attract this age group. For a more significant impact, engaging a broader age range is essential. In addition, creating high-quality and multimodal content can forge emotional connections with potential visitors by enhancing a destination's attractiveness and memorability (Wang & Feng, 2023). Besides, tourism promotions should adapt to the evolving consumer behaviour trends in the tourism market. By understanding and responding to these trends, ethnic

destinations can more effectively shape their imaginaries to attract more potential tourists. Lastly, ethnic minority regions should align their promotion with the central government's policies to gain more favorable support and development opportunities.

Methodologically, this study refines a systematic semiotic framework for analyzing a destination's imaginaries as evaluative attributes and explicates how they are constructed through the evaluative potentials of multimodal resources. This framework can be applied beyond the Chinese context to analyze the multimodal construction of other ethnic destinations' imaginaries, as well as personal and institutional identities. Moreover, the study offers practical insights for other ethnic minority regions aiming to attract more tourists. The study has several limitations. Firstly, it is impossible to completely eliminate subjectivity in data analysis (Fernández-Vallejo, 2023b), especially in interpreting how semiotic resources generate meanings, although quantitative data and linguistic theories support the analysis. Secondly, the focus was solely on the evaluative potentials of verbal and visual semiotics in short videos, excluding sound, which is crucial (Xia & Hafner, 2022). Future research should undertake a comprehensive multimodal analysis, including verbal, visual, and auditory semiotics, to better understand how these resources collectively convey evaluative meanings in ethnic minority discursive branding. Moreover, since destinations often promote overly positive images, future studies should incorporate audience research to achieve deeper insights and develop more effective ethnic minority tourism promotions.

Acknowledgments

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NOTES

[1] Princess Wencheng, a Tang Dynasty princess, married Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century. Her marriage symbolizes harmony and unity between ethnicities.

[2] The information was found on Weibo (https://m.s.weibo.com/).

[3] The hashtag "#内卷化# (involution)" has garnered 550 million views and 448,000 discussions on Zhihu, a popular Chinese social Q&A platform, indicating considerable public interest in the topic. More details can be found at https://www.zhihu.com/topic/20049165/hot

[4] The information was found on Weibo (https://s.weibo.com/).