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LIQUID IDENTITIES: Han Sojourners in Tibet

Abstract: This article presents an ethnographic account of the liquid identities of *Zangpiao*s (Han drifters or sojourners in Tibet). The study reveals that in the liminal time and space of their sojourning, *Zangpiao*s have developed explicit identities and implicit identification associated with multi-level structures and complex social processes. The liminality of *Zangpiao*s offers fresh insights into the ambiguous identity paradox that this alternative subgroup of Han majority have encountered in the modern mobile society characterized by plural and liquid identities. The study sheds light on mobile people's identities and social relationships through an ethnographic inquiry into long-term tourist experiences in a mobile age.

Keywords: identity, liminality, tourism, ethnography, Han Chinese, Tibet

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary society is characteristic of mobilities (Urry,2007), in which identity has emerged as an issue that concerns mobile people in the global age (Zhao,2015,p.33). As one's identity is not "permanently fixed" (Clifford,1997,p.2), its regular examination or re-examination in a liquid society is thus needed (Bauman,2000,p.8) especially for different mobile groups. Tourism along with migration constitutes a major form of mobilities (Hall & Williams,2002), representing a continuum from temporary leave to permanent residence. Situated amidst tourism and migration, this article presents an ethnography of Han sojourners in Tibet (in what they and we call *Zangpiao*s in this study), through an exploration into their long-term sojourning and their shifting identities in order to understand the characteristics of "liquid modernity" in an increasingly mobile society. Methodologically, the ethnographic approach provides a valuable lens on understanding sojourning experiences and changing identities among China's mobile Han majorities.

Literature Review

Mobility has become central to the structuring of people's lives (Salazar,2017); it is not only the main feature of the times (Bauman,1998,pp.85-89; Giddens,1990; Urry,1985), but also a key concept of social science (Bauman,2012; Clifford,1997; Salazar,2017). Zygmunt Bauman described "the present stage of the modern era" (2000,p.2) through the fluidity of liquid and gas, and thus put forward his famous concept of "liquid modernity", to reflect the growing conviction that "change is *the only* permanence, and uncertainty *the only* certainty" (2012,p.viii). According to Bauman, the fluidity of modernity so profoundly unsettles society that it "call(s) for a rethinking of old concepts that were used to frame its narratives" (2000,p.8). Therefore, Bauman developed five key concepts – emancipation, individuality, time/space, work, and community – as critical to understanding this massive transformation. However, because of the new unreachability of global systemic structure (Bauman,2000) and its unstructured, liquid state, what is hidden behind and runs throughout Bauman's conceptions is the issue of identity which is essential to the mobile population.

In a world where "we are all on the move" (Bauman,1998,p.77) and a mobile age when fluidity and spatial movement have profoundly touched the internal social structure (Clifford,1997), identities are closely related to global mobility. On the one hand, global mobility is a social process influencing identities with "far-reaching significance" (Tilly,2006,p.9); on the other hand, identities "are issues that are particularly prominent and distinct in the life of a mobile era" (Zhao,2015,p.33) but are "continuous oscillations" (Ferguson,1999,p.10), "given the intrinsic volatility and unfixity of all or most identities" (Bauman,2000,p.83). As Bauman (2000,p.209) quotes from Maffesoli (1999), "(T)he world we all inhabit nowadays is a 'floating territory' in which 'fragile individuals' meet 'porous reality'". Thus identities have emerged as important research topics and focuses for many disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and political science, whose studies have formed the distinction between the macro issues of identities and nation-states (Huntington,2004; Smith,1991), globalization (Blitvich,2018), and the micro-fields of individuals' daily lives and selves (Hogg & Abrams,1998; Tilly,2006).

Identities are key factors in dealing with mobile people who often confront such issues

(Cohen,2011; Lam,2006; Zhang et al.,2017) due to spatial misplacements, and sociocultural differences between sojourning places and their original homelands. In tourism studies, much of the identity discussion was on cultural representations through heritage or museums (Park,2010; Zhang et al., 2018), aesthetic designs or works of art (Strannegård & Strannegård,2012), and identity construction through cultural festivals or identification with places (Bond & Falk,2013; Gonzalez-Reverte et al.,2012). Another line of the discourse that comes closest to identity due to mobilities is the study of backpackers (Sørensen,2003), drifters (Qian, Yang & Zhu,2015; Zhu & Qian,2015), and urban (middle class) tourists in the peripheral southwest of China (Salazar & Zhang,2013; Su,2013,2014; Zhu,2018), along with their construction of identities (Noy,2004; Qian et al.,2015; Zhang et al.,2017) as well as their view of backpacking or traveling as a way of life (Cohen,2011).

Nonetheless, the complexity of identity is well reflected in Huntington's description of the subject as "ascriptive, territorial, economic, cultural, political, social and national" (2004,p.20). So there are significant differences in identities of different mobile groups in the continuum of mobility.

Among them, traditional migrants and diasporas experience dwelling and community construction due to their long sojourn (Clifford,1997,p.251). Safran (1991,p.83) considers diasporas as people who see their original homeland as where they would eventually return and retain the ideal of maintaining or restoring of this homeland, believing "they are not – and perhaps can not be – fully accepted by their host community". Diasporas have strong identification toward their ancestral homeland instead of the sojourning place, while they are usually unwilling to give up their lives and identities there (Fan,2012). Exiles are similar to diasporas in that they are "in, but not of the place" (Bauman,2000,p.207), though they may not have the same desire to return to homeland as diasporas. Traditional migrants, different from diasporas, try to integrate into an immigrating society and to take it as their place. Some even consider themselves as the "host". For example, although the normalized cross-border life has weakened the sense of state belonging (Huntington,2004; Ong,1999), transnational migrants still show loyalty to and recognition of emigrating countries (Fan,2012).

However, mass tourists, at the other end of the mobility continuum, experience alienation from their home society (Graburn,2017; MacCannell,1976; Xue et al.,2014) but

still clearly understand their “guest” identities and consider their original places as centers, without obvious identification toward tourist destinations. Backpackers, for Sørensen, are “pillars of society, on temporary leave from affluence, but with clear and unwavering intentions to return to ‘normal’ life” (2003,p.852).

Additionally, there are a variety of typologies explored between migrants and tourists such as lifestyle migrants (Benson & O'Reilly,2009,2016; Benson & Osbaldiston,2014,2016; Stone & Stubbs,2007), long-stay tourists (Ono,2008), seasonal lifestyle tourists (Salazar & Zhang,2013), retirement migrants (Gustafson,2002; Rodriguez,2001), tourism migrants (Szivasa, Riley & Aireya,2003; Williams & Hall,2000), and traveling workers and working tourists (Uriely,2001; Uriely & Reichel,2000). Most of these roles consider their original homeland as “center”, but unlike diasporas, they do not have strong identification with their homeland, nor any desire to be rooted in residential places. Among them, lifestyle migrants have been adequately studied as a new mobile group in the spectrum between temporary mobility and permanent migration (Åkerlund,2012). Physically, they pursue a “better life” (Benson & O'Reilly,2009), rarely work in residential place, and are fully aware of their comparative affluence. They tend to identify themselves with their homeland as opposed to the place of residence.

In short, identity “appears fragile, vulnerable” and seems “fixed and solid only when seen...from outside” (Bauman,2000,p.83). The notion encompasses closely related but significantly different forms of explicit identity and implicit identification (Zhu & Duan,2017). Mobile people have diverse identities and different identification with their homelands and sojourning places. Nevertheless, identification receives little attention in identity studies of mobile people though it is essential to understanding them. Yet what supports mobility needs further consideration, as drifting or moving does not mean rootedlessness. Hence the objectives of this undertaking are three-fold: First, instead of identities as adaptive strategy and social identification as a source of belongingness and meaningfulness (Cohen,2011), this study aims to explore the relationships between identity and identification and that between identities and sojourning practice. Second, residing in-between the tourist and migrant typologies, the not-just-for-living mobile group (*Zangpiaos* in this paper) are far from being understood, despite some “lifestyle mobility”

accounts (Cohen, Duan & Thulemark,2013; Zhu,2018); their migrating experiences need to be further explored. Third, although tourism studies have touched upon migration and identity, sociocultural layers and significance of the topic call for more in-depth treatments of migration and social identity (Dayour, Kimbu, & Park,2017; Hall & Williams,2002), particularly in relation to how identities facilitate such mobilities, and what tourism as a popular form of global movements and metaphor of the mobile social world (Dann,2002; Turner,1992) has to offer for identity studies.

The Mobility of Zangpiaos

Social phenomena are “historical in nature” and “relationship among events cannot be abstracted from their past and future” (Mintz,1986,p.14). Originated in the 1980s from the state call for *Yuanzang* (assisting Tibet) after China’s Reform and Opening and furthered by the central government’s program of *Xibudakaifa* (Developing the West) including tourism development in Tibet, *Zangpiaos* have their unique social context. They were initially in small groups, and even considered as mangliu (vags or blind influx) in 1980s and 90s (Wen, 2003) when Hukou (household) Registration was loosening from earlier restrictions for regulating internal migration and social stability (Zhu, 2018,p.360). The operation of Qinghai-Tibet Railway in 2006 has witnessed a rapid increase of both tourists and *Zangpiaos*, while there was a decline after the “3.14” riots in 2008 when many *Zangpiaos* left Tibet, and a vibration and group division have resulted from the urbanization of Lhasa since 2010 (Yeh,2013).

Zangpiaos are Han Chinese who migrate to Tibet (mostly in Lhasa) , escaping from modernity, to pursue a slow-paced and leisure lifestyle (Qian et al.,2015; Zhu & Qian,2015). They are basically Han sojourners who, deeply affected by their past travel experiences, return to Tibet from China’s other provinces or regions to live as semi-permanent drifters (three to ten years or even longer) without long-term stable occupation. Aged 22 to 45, these Han sojourners represent China’s socioeconomic and cultural elites (Li & Wang,2017; Li & Zhang,2008), with advanced educations and respectable middle-class occupations. While females increase in recent years, *Zangpiaos* are primarily male individuals, unlike the

relatively gender balance account of backpackers (Sørensen,2003). Most of them are single and some have a partner or get married (like the Sonamtso couple in this article) before sojourning in Tibet, while only a few find partners afterward.

During their sojourning in Tibet, they not only travel a lot and move among sojourning places, tourist destinations, and their home communities, but also engage in work due to their long-stay, thus sharing some features with tourists, migrants and diasporas. Nonetheless, they are different from migrants because their main purpose is “not-just-for-living” but freedom for travel, while their long-stay and work distinguish them from tourists. They also differ from diasporas in that they neither have affective attachment to their original home communities nor do they intend to stay permanently in Tibet (unlike *Beipiaos* in Beijing). They are similar to lifestyle migrants (Benson & O'Reilly,2009), lifestyle travelers (Cohen,2010,2011) and tourism migrants (Williams & Hall,2000), but are alienated from their home society and do not regard their homeland as their structural center. Moreover, they are not affluent like lifestyle migrants and live austere during their sojourning (compared with their prior material life), which greatly impacts their social connections and relations.

Importantly, the March 14 riot in 2008 disclosing Han-Tibetan ethnic relations, along with urbanization since 2010, has enhanced *Zangpiaos*' social identity as an issue of mobile people encounter (Cohen,2011; Zhang et al.,2017), because they not only intensify the floating but also lead to subgroup divisions into “*Zang'ao*” (those continued sojourners or sufferers in Tibet, homophony with Tibetan Mastiff) and “*Lapiaos*” (the newcomer drifters in Lhasa). This questions the socially and economically advantaged Han identities (Zhu & Qian,2015) and indicates their anxiety for identity.

In short, *Zangpiaos* are similar to but different from most mobile people and therefore constitute a new identity-sensitive category in between tourists and lifestyle migrants. Despite the fact that similar mobile Han populations are emerging in other parts of China's southwest where non-Han minorities predominate, there has been little sustained study of these groups or their identities (but see Chen & Weiler,2014; Qian, Yang, & Zhu,2015; Su,2013,2014; Yang, Ling & Duan,2012; Zhu & Qian,2015). This article asks how the in-between identities of *Zangpiaos* impact their sojourning practice and identification. How do they construct their own identity and identification as they drift and sojourn? Focusing on the micro level, this

ethnography forays into the diversity of mobile people's identities and the relationships among identity, identification and mobility in the global mobile system.

METHODOLOGY

Because of their past experiences of, and familiarity with travel in Tibet, many *Zangpiao*s have independently run small tourism-related businesses like restaurants, hostels, souvenir stores, and travel agencies in Lhasa. Among them, restaurants are the best choice for *Zangpiao*s to have a foothold in Tibet because of the low entry threshold (particularly the low requirement for capital).

While tourist ethnography (Graburn,2002; White & White,2007) is challenged as “methodologically... impossible to adhere to the conventional ethnographic fieldwork framework of prolonged social interaction with and observation of a given set of informants”(Sørensen,2003,p.850), restaurants operated by *Zangpiao*s are found to be significant and valuable sites for sustained interactions with Han sojourners that fulfil the traditional requirements of doing an ethnography, since the operators regard the restaurant as their “home in Tibet” and spend most of their time there. As *Sister Zhou*, the boss' wife of Taishan Restaurant said, “the living place (we rent) for sleeping ...but it is not home; this (restaurant) is home (in Tibet).” Moreover, tourist restaurants serve as an ideal setting to reflect upon identity issues of their operators as home (or the house) is a symbol of the self (Despres,1991) and that “to choose a house meant to choose a lifestyle” (Fleischer, 2007). Therefore, the restaurant is not only an operational space where all kinds of *Zangpiao*s and tourists visit, but also a representational space of clandestine social life (Lefebvre,1991,p.33), indicative of the operators' attitude towards and social interactions with locals, competitors, tourists and *Zangpiao*s.

Because of tourist restaurants' small scale and competition with local ones especially after the effect of the riot & urbanization, *Zangpiao* operators are more sensitive toward their social identities when catering to the needs of local residents and tourists.

Deriving from Mintz (1986), as a socioeconomic and political context, tourist restaurants operated by *Zangpiao*s serve spatially as a “fixed setting”, and the stage from 2006 to 2010 temporally as a “moment” for this ethnography to account for the movement of

and changing identities among Han sojourners.

In light of the above, Eisenhardt and Graebner's (2007) theoretical sampling of a single case is adopted (instead of a random or stratified approach) as its purpose is developing (instead of testing) theory. Taishan Restaurant (Figure 1), a small tourism business by a *Zangpiao* couple from 2006 to 2010, along with three key informants (the couple and Mr. Zhou), is selected for an ethnographic case inquiry. Different from traditional case studies, theoretical sampling means that cases are selected for the likelihood of offering theoretical insight (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27). While multiple-case studies typically provide a stronger base for theory building (Yin, 1994), a single case based on theoretical sampling and persuasive power can enrich the description of a phenomenon (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 27; Siggelkow, 2007), and thus "enable the creation of more complicated theories than multiple-case studies" (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007, p. 30).



(Notes: Because of the centrality of Jokhang and Potala Palace as attractions both for tourists and pilgrims, the surrounding areas of Barkhor Street and Beijing Road with Jokhang and Potala Palace in the center, constitute the traditional tourist district in Lhasa. Barkhor Street, originally known as the one around Jokhang of the three major pilgrim circuits in Lhasa (Lingkhor, Barkhor and Nankhor), is now widely referred to as the circumambulation road and surrounding streets.)

Figure 1. Sketch map of Taishan Restaurant in Lhasa

This ethnography includes countless observations, dialogues and interactions, as well as interviews during the break. Notably, ethnography is different from quantitative methods in that it

“cannot be contained in advance in philosophy, theory, or hypothesis” (MacCannell,1992,p.9); it also differs from general interviews in that it focuses not only on what people say, but also how they say it and how they do the saying. Thus, it is particularly important to observe and to listen in the field; to walk into the restaurant means walking into the field. *Zangpiaos*’ social interactions and dialogues in the restaurant, especially their attitude towards different people, are also essential contents implying their social identities and implicit identification.

Meanwhile, considering *Zangpiaos*’ mobility and their tourism pursuit, the author also applies Marcus’ (1995) method of tracing “people” and Graburn’s (2002) tourist ethnography to travel as a backpacker with the couple to Mt. Everest in September 2006 and to Linzhi in July 2010 for establishing mutual trust, obtaining permission for study, and for participatory observation of their travel life which is extremely important for them to sojourn in Tibet.

During his long-term fieldwork, the author established close contact with the couple. Besides having many dinners there and eating frequently with the couple and Mr. Zhou, he brought them customers during his fieldwork through meeting with tourists and other *Zangpiaos* in the restaurant, helped them greet customers at the peak hour (to the extent of being recognized as a part-time waiter). So he could have special time for extended conversations: the brief leisure time after breakfast but before preparing for lunch, and the more extended *Lagua* (chatting) hour while preparing for the next day after the restaurant was closed.

In terms of ethics (AAA,1998), the author did not conceal his identity and positionality as a doctoral field researcher and the purpose of his study. Although Mr. Zhou was extremely vigilant and lost contact after the restaurant was closed, he did not reject observations and interviews and could sometimes offer valuable travel experiences; while the boss was interested in the study, not only willing to discuss *Zangpiao* matters but also providing useful comments like Sørensen’s (2003) backpackers, though a little exaggerating.

This article is one of the ethnographic studies on *Zangpiaos* since 2003. The fieldwork of Taishan Restaurant began in the summer of 2006, with two revisits in 2008 and 2010. The three stages of fieldwork lasted for ten months (June to November in 2006, and two months in the summer of 2008 and 2010 respectively). Thereafter, the author followed up the couple

virtually through social media until 2012 when they returned to their homeland. Zhu (2018) observes, “(S)uch a long-term observation” can allow us to “understand people’s attitudes... motivation and experiences” (p.374).

In terms of inductive analysis and interpretation, the initial round of sense-making was conducted in Chinese. Through iterations, concepts were then sorted and themes developed before they were translated into English for further communication. Where/when a quote was extracted for reporting, its English translation was faithfully made in the actual context to avoid any potential loss of meaning of a text from its occurrence. In this process of rendering between the two languages, trustworthiness was observed through “increasing our awareness to help us control intrusion of bias into the analysis while retaining sensitivity to what is being said in the data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p.43). Notably, the authors of this paper are comfortable and competent in both languages for scholarly communication.

IDENTIFIES AND IDENTIFICATION OF ZANGPIAOS

Multiple Identities of Taishan Restaurant and Zangpiaos

Taishan Restaurant, as part of the famous Kiley Hostel’s property, is located on the west side of the hostel’s gate on Beijing Road in Lhasa (Figures 1 and 2). As one of the three most renowned Tibetan-style hostels, Kiley Hostel is recommended by almost all travel guide books including *The Lonely Planet*. The operators Sonamtso and *Sister Zhou* in their thirties (in 2006), are a couple from Shandong Province with a high school daughter in their hometown. As former employees of public institutions and state-owned enterprises, the couple entered Tibet again in 2005 to “drift” after their first travel there, and started to operate Taishan Restaurant one year later in 2006. Until the end of 2010 when they shut down the restaurant and left Tibet, they had sojourned there for six years. In the eyes of tourists, customers and even themselves, they are truly *Zangpiaos* who *piao* (drift) in Tibet. Hence *Zangpiao* is an identity given by tourists and acknowledged by themselves.

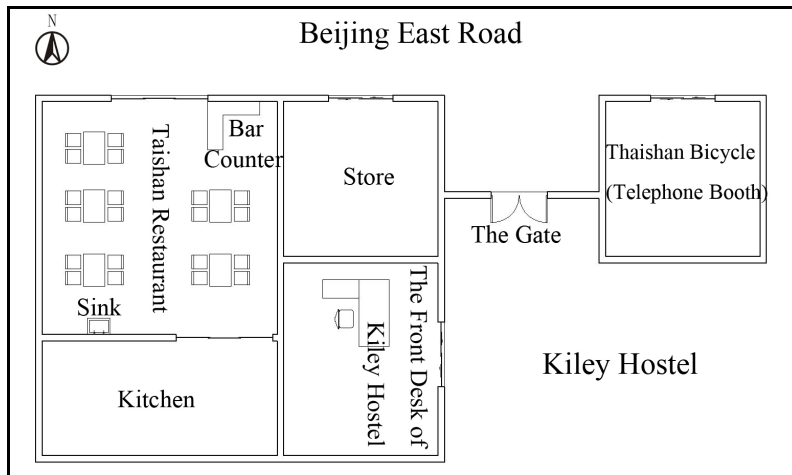


Figure 2. Sketch map of Taishan Restaurant and Kiley Hostel

The name of Taishan Restaurant is distinctly indicative with a clear Shandong image since Mt. Taishan is a renowned UNESCO world heritage site there. Its naming, similar to those restaurants operated by labor migrants on the opposite side of the street - such as *Shancheng Xiaochi* (snacks from Chongqing) and *Chuanyu Fandian* (Sichuan and Chongqing style restaurant) – plays a role in identity announcement, in addition to introducing its cuisine and promoting its business. What is odd is that it offers the most popular Sichuan (instead of Shandong) cuisine, with the chef from Sichuan. On the east side of Kiley Hostel’s gate, there is a telephone booth called “Taishan Bicycle” (Figure 2), which is almost the same in color and shape as the Taishan Restaurant logo. Sonamtso, in a vague response to the inquiry, said, “We are brothers and friends”. The boss of Taishan Bicycle, a young man in his twenties with similar physical features as Sonamtso, stressed in fluent *Putonghua*, “We are a family!” In a later revisit, his wife reluctantly revealed the truth that they are a Tibetan couple who have operated the store for many years, and that they are neither relatives nor friends of the Sonamtso couple who are merely permitted to use the name of Taishan Bicycle for the convenience and promotion of business; Taishan Restaurant has nothing to do with Taishan Bicycle.

Individuals have multiple identities, so do small groups (Huntington,2004,p.20). Obviously, the naming of the restaurant reveals the Sonamtso couple’s multiple identities and identification predicament. Identities and relations networks are considered as migrants’ capital or adaptive strategies(Benson & O’Reilly,2009; Williams & Hall,2000). The naming is

thus an attempt for acceptance by or integration into the community with Taishan Bicycle's local influence and notability, because *Zangpiaos'* tourism business has been ostracized by local operators for its competition.

The Taishan Restaurant operators' efforts to capitalize on the appeal of authentic Tibetanness are displayed in several ways, the most prominent of which is the Tibetan name of Sonamtso, the operator, despite his Han status. He flaunts his Tibetan name given by a local Tibetan monk on the basis of their friendship, and repeatedly asks to be called by his Tibetan name. Furthermore, the restaurant hires a Tibetan girl, who plays multiple roles not only as a waitress, but also as a translator or a broker to select Tibetan guests. Even up till now, Tibetan employees are still rare in such businesses operated by *Zangpiaos*. Symbolically, these are markers of the restaurant embracing Tibetan culture, opening to locals, and as a setting to initiate conversation with local Tibetans. In addition, the boss and his wife also try to contact local Tibetans and keep close friendship with monks; they often go to the monasteries for worship and charity on important religious festivals like ordinary Tibetans. These efforts help popularize Taishan Restaurant amongst local customers, resulting in sufficient and stable business from the Tibetans – most are pilgrims - even in the off-season of winter, so “the business (in winter) is as usual”. In contrast, other restaurants operated by *Zangpiaos* only open for about half a year in the peak season of summer, and cannot compete with Taishan Restaurant in terms of operating days and hours.

However, the restaurant does not boast Tibetan cultural symbols, and Tibetan-style decoration is generally replaced by Han Chinese cultural styles. In contrast to the typically low and dim gates of local Tibetan-style buildings, Taishan Restaurant uses a very modern push-pull glass door, and its inside is equipped with a stylish bar counter and cashier register (Figure 2). This, in MacCannell's (1976) terms, is the front stage to give customers an arrival welcome and a departure farewell, and an important window to communicate with them. The bar counter also functions as a cashier register, effectively distinguishing the couple from the staff. The sink, rarely found in local Tibetan restaurants, illustrates explicitly its Han “identity”. Its Sichuan cuisine and chefs also strongly convey its Han culture atmosphere and its choice of customers. Moreover, the couple particularly emphasize their former tourist status and their current identity as *Zangpiaos*.

This identity, together with their similar travel experiences, common language and socio-cultural background with Han tourists in the remote and exotic place of Tibet, often arouses emotional resonance and recognition. So Taishan Restaurant is often more recognized and “favored” by tourists than other ordinary restaurants run by labor migrants, and has thus become “the canteen” or gathering place for tourists. In general, tourists are primary customers of the restaurant, due to its adjacency to the popular Kiley Hostel. Therefore, the “host-guest” relationships between *Zangpiaos* and tourists inevitably have business implications, and their “friendship” with tourists is unavoidably seen as a special social capital with commercial value (Zhang,2009). In other words, the couple’s current *Zangpiao* identity, their past travel experiences in Tibet, and the resulting tourists’ recognition, have served as a means of promotion; identities thus have their commercial tinges.

“A person’s identities can change over time...(A) person may have an identity that cannot be clearly defined at a certain moment, or have several identities at the same time” (Liu,2008,p.17). Through operating the restaurant, the couple have displayed multiple identities of “hosts” and “guests”, as well as locals and outsiders (Su,2013,p.161), and have presented the flow and variation of identities. Multiple and liquid identities are adaptive strategies for *Zangpiaos* as outsiders, to face the misplacement of two kinds of social space and sociocultural conflicts, and are efforts towards being accepted by the sojourning society. Of course, the couple’s multiple identities, as well as their attempts and efforts to obtain identification and recognition from both tourists and local Tibetans through the use of local Tibetan stores’ name, also reflect the identity contradiction and predicament they have encountered.

Identification and the Mooring of Liquidity

Knowing their predicament of identity, it is interesting to probe on why *Zangpiaos* insist on drifting in Tibet, and what supports their sojourning and drifting.

There are a few pictures of Tibetan sceneries on the restaurant’s wall for the promotion of their tourist car rental business, which reveals yet another layer in the couple’s identity as the “boss” of the tourist car rental business. In 2006, Sonamtso bought a second-hand imported off-road vehicle — popular with tourists in Tibet — which enabled him to run a car

rental business in addition to the restaurant. Due to limited public transportation, renting off-road vehicles from drivers is the best choice for individual tourists to experience in-depth travel in Tibet. Tourist drivers thus play an essential role in tourism development in Tibet, and become a high-paying and enviable occupation (Zhang,2009). Some Tibetan drivers even use their Tibetan identities as a promotional tool for high price (Zhang,2009), making ethnic identities a commodity (Burns & Novelli,2006,p.3). Surprisingly, the car rental price of Sonamtso, as Han, is 10-20% higher than that of Tibetan drivers. Take the Lhasa-Shigatse-Mt.Everest 4-to-5-day tour as an example. The market price in 2006 was around RMB4,500 or USD577 (3-4 passengers per car), but Sonamtso asked for more than RMB5,000 (USD641).

Moreover, he was unwilling to drive every day, because “it’s very tiring, (I need to) rest for a few days”. In contrast, other tourist drivers, regardless of Tibetan or Han, rarely had a break during the peak season. Even if he drives for tourists, Sonamtso often reserves a seat for Sister Zhou when the weather is permissible and travel routes are suitable. “Travel with customers for free (actually earn less money). How wonderful! This is the best season to appreciate the best Tibet” (Sonamtso). While Sister Zhou adds, “What are you making so much money for? After all, we come here (Tibet) not entirely for money.” Sacrificing commercial profits for family trips is not something that labor migrants would or could do, as these migrants such as the operators of *Chuanyu Fandian* across the street are unable to give up income for leisure.

Obviously, the high price of tourist car rental is not an identity promotion; instead, it is an endeavor of the couple as *Zangpiaos* to balance life and business, which reflects not only their enthusiasm for travel in Tibet and their persistence in the purpose of sojourning there, but also their self-identification as “boss”, because both identities of restaurateurs and tourist car owners can enable them to “live the life they want” in Tibet. Thus, the restaurant, by offering the identities of restaurateurs and tourist car owners, has become the couple’s “home in Tibet”.

Although mobility and flow are fundamental core values of this society and this era (Bauman,2000), the mobile world does not necessarily mean that people are rootless. As Outhwaite and Ray (2005,p.127) state, without the large number of moorings (immobile

systems), there would be no growth of mobilities and no insight into movement and flow; or as Bauman (2012,p.ix) argues, “liquidity is (was) not an adversary, but an effect of that quest for solidity ... It was the quest for the solidity of things and states that most often triggered, kept in motion and guided their liquefaction”. Consequently, the enthusiasm for travel in Tibet and the pursuit of value ideals embodied in the “boss” identity is the main purpose of *Zangpiaos*’ drifting and sojourning in Tibet, and the mooring supports their flow of identities and touristic movement in reality. Therefore, unlike traditional migrants’ linear process of migration, settlement, adaptation, assimilation or integration, *Zangpiaos* often experience a long or short traveling life before choosing settlement for home and dwelling construction (Clifford,1997,p.251). This is the reason why the Sonamtso couple “settled down” merely in the summer of 2006 to run Taishan Restaurant after more than one year’s drifting since they first entered Tibet in 2005, and that Mr. Zhou still drifts without a fixed abode.

The unusual Tibetan tourism complex, the pursuit of value ideal, and the atmosphere of “home in Tibet” presented by Taishan Restaurant have aroused emotional resonance and recognition of *Zangpiaos*, among whom, Mr. Zhou who often appears in the restaurant is a typical example. In his twenties (in 2006) with dark skin from Henan Province, he is a typical outdoor man. He traveled to Tibet many years ago and liked it so much that he could no longer take up his previous work life. He then managed to return to Tibet in 2003 and became a *Zangpiao*. As a free outdoor leader, he guides tourists in Tibet to “take the unusual path and visit unusual places”, and is “always on the road”. As he says, “I only run the business in the peak season, and travel where I like when the business is slump. I’m not used to urban life, but can drift around here and there as freely as a wild crane or floating clouds. The key is to be able to do your favorite things (travel in Tibet) ... When tired, I will take a break in Sister Zhou’s place (Taishan Restaurant) and give her a hand.” Mr. Zhou really makes a big “contribution” to the restaurant.

Frankly, he is a very attractive male - strapping, good-looking, having a charming voice, laid-back with unrestrained personality – “with stories” and is extremely familiar with tourism in Tibet. These traits have strong appeal to tourists, especially female tourists who are new to the plateau, young and innocent, or are seeking “(affective) grief-treating”. Some customers of the restaurant joke that Mr. Zhou “is welcomed among females of all ages”, not

only “a heartthrob” but also “a lady-killer”. His personal charisma brings more popularity to the restaurant, and can also fuel the restaurant’s tourist car rental business. During our first chat, when knowing that I was going to the far west of Ngari, Mr. Zhou said casually, “You can consider Sonamtso’s car”.

Although they cannot entirely isolate themselves from economic interests, the couple and Mr. Zhou still develop a special friendship beyond business partners. Because of their similar experiences and the pursuit of value ideals, the two sides have resonated so continuously that they are mirror images of and are identified by each other. As a result, Mr. Zhou and the couple, without actual kinship, treat each other as “brothers and sisters”; Mr. Zhou appears as a family member in the restaurant, and can cook “as if at home”. When introducing Mr. Zhou, Sister Zhou particularly stressed that he cooked a good dish, and *hongshaorou* (braised pork in brown sauce) is his specialty. When the couple are absent, Mr. Zhou not only takes the initiative to greet the guests and serve as a temporary waiter, he also takes on the cashier role which is an extremely unusual practice since only the operators can do so. Besides, he is the only one in the restaurant to dine with the couple at the same table like a family. In comparison, the head chef, who is critical to the operation of the restaurant, consciously does not do so.

When an individual is accustomed to a certain cognitive environment and capable of expressing and communicating identities, he has a home (Silverstone et al.,1994; Tucker,1994). Based on their mutual identification and the setting of the restaurant, the couple and Mr. Zhou construct a “home in Tibet”, which carries their value ideals – “unconstrained in-the-sky (traveling) life”, released from worldly life, smoking and drinking, being with a gang of friends – and is where they can express true identities, where they are self-fulfilling, and a place they really want (Tucker,1994). For Mr. Zhou, it is an almost perfect “home”: the warm family atmosphere compared with the harsh outdoor life, a stopover in the journey, a way to communicate with tourists and acquaint customers, and a place to start and end a new journey. Consequently, Mr. Zhou has a very strong recognition of and attachment to the restaurant. After “fleeing” to Lhasa from southeast Tibet, Mr. Zhou’s first place to stop was Taishan Restaurant. Sister Zhou once stated, “He once... went to the Yarlung Zangbo Grand Canyon for a few months by himself... We are all worried whether

something has happened to him... Later, he came back, on foot, for he had not a penny left on him... You know what? He looked literally like a beggar at that time! None of us recognized him... and almost drove him out (laughter)!”

Around Taishan Restaurant, Mr. Zhou and the couple have established very close family-like relationships in social interactions and have gained mutual and self-identification, which are crucial emotional basis and sources of identities to support their drifting and taking Tibet as their home. Their intimate friendship is not only a reflection of identities and value ideals, but also an embodiment of the dialectical relationships between *Zangpiaos*' movement and mooring: traveling in Tibet is the mooring of their sojourning (movement) in Tibet; the touristic operating space (the restaurant), as “home in Tibet”, is their mooring in traveling (movement). If these multiple identities and their flows are adaptive strategies to integrate into the sojourning place, then the “boss” identity with which they can travel freely and the identification of like-minded “friends” are the couple’s initiative and active choices. In other words, the *Zangpiao* couple have their own identities and identification.

Liminal Space, Identities and Identification

The couple’s long-lasting confusion and deliberation towards questions like “where is the home?”, “how long will the restaurant last?”, “what are the plans for the future?” indicate that they are still in a state of identity-confirmation without determinate social identities though they have the mooring of drifting. Living in two distinct sociocultural spaces without determinate social identities, they are neither “hosts” nor “guests”, neither locals nor outsiders, neither migrants nor tourists though they share some features of these identities. Their multiple but indeterminate, ambiguous, and thus “betwixt and between” identities are essential to understanding why they are called *Zangpiaos*. The Chinese character of *piao* (floating, drifting) literally conveys the uncertain state of their identities.

In 1909, Arnold van Gennep (1960) proposes the theory of “rites of passage” and considers it as a universal construction of human society, in that any stage of life could be summed up by “rites of passage” (pp.2-3). Victor Turner (1969), however, employs the term of “state” to encompass van Gennep’s notions (p.94), and theorizes *rites of passage* as states which “are not confined to culturally defined life-crises but may accompany any change from

one state to another” (Turner,1967,pp.94-95). Intending to see society and rites as dynamic processes, he further formulates his theory of ritual process, emphasizing ambiguous and indeterminate liminality and “betwixt and between” in liminal state (Turner,1969,p.95).

In light of these theories, *Zangpiaos*’ sojourn in Tibet with indeterminate social identities is a kind of special liminal stage that can be regarded as a special rite of passage, or self-imposed rite of passage in Sørensen’s (2003) term. Tibet, or more precisely the tourism operation (the restaurant) considered as “home in Tibet”, is a special liminal space, not-Tibetan-not-Han, not only family-like and incorporated but also indeterminate. Since their interactions are based on their common pursuit of value ideals and identities, the couple and Mr. Zhou live in what Turner (1967,1969) called the “communita” – a mutually integrated state that blurs the relationship and contradiction among social hierarchies and identities, or an “anti-structural” state in Turner’s term.

With the above liminal theory, the linear flow of time and the generating process of *Zangpiaos*’ identities can be observed from a broader spatial-temporal perspective (Table 1).

Table 1. *Zangpiaos*’ Identities and Identification in Liminal Periods

Liminal Period	Pre-liminal (Pre- <i>Zangpiao</i>)	—	Liminal (<i>Zangpiao</i>)	—	Post-liminal (Post- <i>Zangpiao</i>)
Identity	Identities of original homeland	—	Indeterminate multiple identities	—	Liquid but determinate social identities
Identification	Dis-identification in original homeland	—	Self- and inter-identification	—	Diverse identification

Tracing back along the timeline, *Zangpiaos*’ sojourn and drifting in Tibet are mainly rooted in the endogenetic alienation of social transformation and modernity (Oak,2005; Wang,2000; Zhang & Bi,2014), pressure from social tension (Su,2013,p.162) as well as the resulting spiritual sense of homelessness, rootedless experiences (Yang,2012,p.80) or uprootedness (Oak,2005). In this sense, *Zangpiaos* are similar to MacCannell’s (1976) and Graburn’s (2017) tourists who look for authenticity because of an alienation induced by modernity, or Cohen’s drifters (1972,1973) and his subsequent typology of experimental tourists (1979) who struggle to find centers and meanings, or Zhu’s (2018) Lijiang new

residents of China's urban middle class escaping from the stress of city life for idyllic spiritual home. Among them, drifters are "decentralized" in that they keep searching for the "center" and quest for their lifestyle. This is one of the significant manifestations of *Zangpiaos'* anti-structural features because their pursuits of value ideals can not be understood and recognized by the mainstream society. It is difficult or even impossible for them to communicate with friends and relatives about their pursuits of such values. That's why Mr. Zhou's family and friends believe that he is "*xiazheteng*" (making a fool of himself), and he, therefore, chooses to conceal his sojourn in Tibet from his family.

Douglas Massey (1986), in his study of Mexican migrants to the United States, argues that the home in a sojourning place is neither where they want or belong to, nor a place they identify. However, the fact that the couple and Mr. Zhou choose to sojourn in Tibet implies both their dis-identification with their original home society, and their identification and longing for tourist life, indicating that Tibet is not where they belong to but a space or state that they want, which differentiates them from migrants. Unlike most migrants' passive choices, *Zangpiaos'* selections of sojourning are active ones. Actually, the socially constructed sacred Tibet image (Zhang,2010,p.45) especially by mass media with "a strong and negotiated influence" (Mercille,2005), together with the dominant (Western) imagination of Tibet as Shangri-La (Yue,2008), pulls *Zangpiaos* to sojourn in Tibet. They are modern individuals escaping from urban life for a Utopian spiritual home (MacCannell,1976; Wang,2000).

During their sojourn in Tibet, the couple and Mr. Zhou, by means of inter- and self-identification acquired from "boss" identities and their close friendship, as well as the support (mooring) for the pursuit of value ideals, collectively construct together a "home in Tibet" based on the restaurant. This is the medium and presentation of their sojourn and foothold in Tibet, and "the place where they genuinely want" to carry on their active pursuit of value ideals. This is *Zangpiaos'* liminal period. Owing to its betwixt and between feature, *Zangpiaos* produce multiple identities to adapt to the sojourning place, and identification of self-fulfillment and pursuits of value ideals. The former reflects *Zangpiaos'* identity ambiguity and dilemma, while the latter reveals the social meanings and the mooring of their flow.

For individuals and groups living in liminal spaces, the source of social meaning is particularly significant (Zhu & Duan, 2017). Yet what is slightly different is that the social meaning of *Zangpiao*'s sojourn in Tibet does not originate from their outward ambiguous multiple identities, but from their inner self- and inter-identification, especially the recognition of travel life and their pursuits of value ideals that the sojourn embodies. It is the identification of their Utopian values and the expectation of the change of future identities (states), which enable *Zangpiao*s to see the value and meaning of sojourning in Tibet. In other words, during their sojourning, *Zangpiao*s bring order to their disordered and indeterminate social state of the liminal stage by imagining, constructing, or transmitting social meanings. In this sense, *Zangpiao*'s sojourn in Tibet has liminal meanings and can be regarded as a special rite of passage.

During the post-*Zangpiao* period, due to the influence of various factors especially the capital city's squeeze on operational space in the context of mass tourism and urbanization, *Zangpiao*s reluctantly realize that their "home in Tibet" is not the home they imagine and truly desire. As Sister Zhou clearly expresses it, "it is not fun anymore". Mr. Zhou also feels that "(Lhasa) isn't interesting any more", so he "would rather live in a Tibetan home in Lhasa suburb" when he does not need to guide any tour.

At this point, even though identities are still flowing and identification diverse, they are determinate and are *Zangpiao*'s active choices after the liminal stage. As a result, the couple later abandon the restaurant when Kiley Hostel was demolished in the reconstruction of Lhasa in late 2010, continuing to travel in Tibet and the neighboring Sichuan and Yunnan provinces for more than one year before they eventually leave for their hometown in Shandong, which symbolizes their compromise and return to the mainstream values. Nonetheless, Mr. Zhou, who refuses to change, continues to drift in Tibet in search of his spiritual home and value ideals, and may even treat the Utopian quest as his lifelong "career" or "lifestyle mobility" in Zhu's (2018) term, like Cohen's drifters (1972) and experimental tourists (1979). For people like Mr. Zhou, the liminal state of drifting "become(s) a permanent condition"; thus *Zangpiao*'s drifting and liquidity present various patterns and great diversity. From this standpoint, *Zangpiao*'s indeterminate "drifting state" can be the representation of "liquid modernity" and the embodiment of its liquidity, which has profound

social significance and implications. Their identifications also have great diversity as the couple and Mr. Zhou all have different identifications towards Tibet as their sojourning place and their original homeland.

Notably, while the riot greatly influenced *Zangpiaos'* sojourning with many leaving Tibet afterwards, the couple stayed behind but eventually left Tibet not because of the riot but due to mass tourism and urbanization since 2010. This indicates that the pursuit of free travel and value ideals are the mooring of their sojourning, and that the period of 2006 to 2010 covering mass tourism, political riot and urbanization plays essential roles in *Zangpiaos'* changing identities. The linear flow of *Zangpiaos'* identities, different from those of other mobile populations, reveals that *Zangpiaos* may constitute a new category of mobility.

CONCLUSION

This article explores the core social value of mobility (Bauman,2000; Clifford,1997) and the distinct temporal dimensions of identities (Zhao,2015). Based on an ethnographic study of a tourist restaurant and its three Han sojourners in Tibet, it provides fresh insights into mobile people's identities and their relationship with the sending and receiving societies as they develop through their tourism and drifting experiences (Figure 3). *As a unique mobile group, Zangpiaos* are primarily but not necessarily Han Chinese, who are mostly from the mainstream society, on the road and away from their original home; and they are not limited to sojourning in Tibet. Thus, this study provides a new touristic perspective on the transferring of mobilities from the micro level of "life-policies" (Bauman,2000,p.7), and contributes a tourism angle or lends such a lens on studying mobile people's identities, as tourism "is a primary ground for the production of new cultural forms on a global base" (MacCannell,1992,p.1).

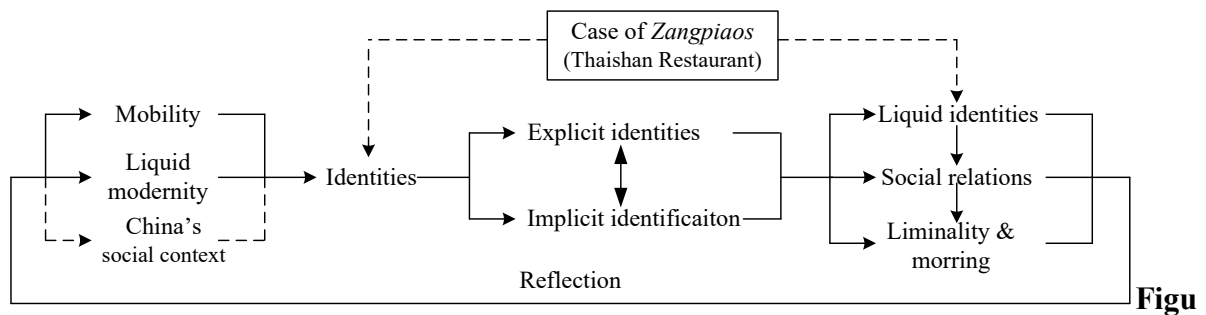


Figure 3. Theorizing *Zangpiaos*' Identities

The findings reveal that *Zangpiaos*' identities developed in their sojourn are of a liquid multidimensional structural system composing of external identities and internal identification, along with a social process of interactions between the self and the society. This is not only a manifestation and demonstration but also a micro-level complement of Bauman's (2000) "liquid modernity", as it confirms the argument that identity is multidimensional with multiple appearances as "fluids travel easily" and are unstoppable as they flow and leak (Bauman,2000,p.2; Huntington,2004). Hall's (1992) theory of a postmodern subject who has no fixed or permanent identities but different ones at different times, some contradictory and disunified, sheds light on the dilemmas of identities and identification in a mobile age. More importantly, as Hogg and Abrams (1998,p.23) argue, the self is a continuum "ranging from exclusively social to exclusively personal identity". *Zangpiaos* acquire self and social identification by means of their identities of "boss" and friend, and gradually form clear self-conception and self-categorization, which ultimately determines whether they stay in or leave Tibet. Realizing that Tibet is not their "ideal home", the Sonamtso couple finally physically return to their homeland under the pressures of mass tourism and urbanization, which may not reflect their spiritual identification.

In this regard, *Zangpiaos*' identities are socially-generated processes: the indeterminate multiple social identities, and self- and inter-identification during *Zangpiao* (liminal) period, not only originate from the dis-identification of their original homeland in the pre-*Zangpiao* (pre-liminal) period, but also determine the liquid identities and diverse identification in the post-*Zangpiao* (post-liminal) period. Therefore, they neither look for long-term rooting in Tibet (Qian et al., 2015), nor do they keep the prospect of returning to

the socioeconomic “center” (Zhu & Qian, 2015). In other words, the couple and Mr. Zhou’s identities and identification are diverse in the complicated process of being continuously formed and shaped, which is not only “being” but also actively “becoming” (Hall, 1990).

In mobilities studies, the supports of movement behind liquid identities are thought to be the immobile mooring (Outhwaite & Ray, 2005, p.127; Urry, 2002, p.37) which is nonetheless critiqued as “fragile, vulnerable, and constantly torn apart” (Bauman, 2000, p. 83) or “fragmentary and fragmented” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1977, p.5). Despite such debates, these invisible mechanisms and supports are so strong that *Zangpiaos* can rely and insist on long-term drifting and sojourning. Compared with explicit identities, the introspective identification and the pursuit of value ideals are not only the sources of social meaning of liminal *Zangpiaos* and their indeterminate social identities, but also the mooring that supports their flowing. Thus the dialectical relationships between mobility and mooring can not only help us better understand the impacts of locally and culturally specific life patterns – *Zangpiaos*’ sojourning in Tibet, it could also allow us to examine the models that underpin the mobile world, while making the global system more complicated (Outhwaite & Ray, 2005, p.127).

Notably, the mooring of value ideals is fulfilled by means of flowing travel and drifting in Tibet, highlighting the value and importance of identities and the pursuit of value ideals. Thus fixation and flowing are a pair of dialectical and inseparable combinations, and mobile *Zangpiaos* are in a paradoxical situation where tourism is the mooring of drifting sojourn and sojourn space (“home in Tibet”) is the mooring of tourism. In other words, *Zangpiaos* find the mooring of movement by movement itself, which is similar to what MacCannell (1992) refers to as people wandering around the world for a permanent home life. Or in Bauman’s (2000, p.209) direct quotation of Maffesoli (1999), “‘rootedness’, if any, can be only dynamic”. Meanwhile, such a paradoxical situation not only implies the value of identity to mobility studies, but also reveals the liquid characteristics of identity in the mobile age: not only identity and identification but also the mooring of mobility are liquid. As Salazar (2017, p.5) asserts, “our life-world... is in flux”.

This ethnography on *Zangpiaos*’ liquid identities offers insights into mobilities and

identities, as well as a perspective on understanding their profound meaningfulness and values of the time. In particular, *Zangpiaos'* liminality of indeterminate social identities offers a reasonable interpretation of the seemingly contradictory and confused multiple liquid identities. It conforms to the “plural” and “liquid” identity requirements (Li,2008) of the global liquid times, which are not, in what Hall (1992) states, as unable to be unified. In addition to the profound and significant social process of global mobility, the study also demonstrates that the liminal stage plays a key role in the flow of identities. Therefore, the liminal theory provides not only refreshing theoretical interpretations on identity, but also a new approach for identity studies.

Why identity is so important “owes...to it being a *surrogate of community*: of that allegedly ‘natural home’” (Bauman,2001,p.15), or in Young’s (1999,p.164) comments on Hobsbawm’s ideas, “just as community collapses, identity is invented”. In light of this, *Zangpiaos'* multiple identities and identification dilemma signify structural issues of the society, since *Zangpiaos'* choices of drifting sojourn and value ideals are products of their Han status, habits and culture they symbolized (Bourdieu,1984). Therefore, *Zangpiaos'* drifting sojourn is not chaotic and meaningless but a special life pattern containing implicit liquidity and micro forms of identities. This can not only help us better understand mobile people’s migrating and identities in the temporal context of liquidity, but also provide insights into liquid modernity and current mobile society.

Finally, on methodological reflections, in studying *Zangpiaos* as mobile people in the mobile field, tourist restaurants as their “homes in Tibet” have served as a “fixed setting”, which is much needed in traditional ethnographical inquiries. Further, in future considerations of the dialectic relationships between movement and mooring, the importance of mooring for movement (Outhwaite & Ray,2005,p.17), and the movement of mobile people in both physical and spiritual manifestations (Bauman,2000,pp.207,209), such special underpinned fixities as space and place for researching explicit mobilities of mobile people could offer tremendous methodological prospects for traditional ethnography. However, this kind of field is still mobile with relative fixation that coincides with the metaphor and the dialectical relationships between movement and mooring. In a way, this article offers an innovative attempt in integrating the fixed fieldwork of a traditional ethnography with that of

a mobile tourist ethnography to understand the liquidity of identities of a mobile group, now referred to as *Zangpiaos* in this ethnography.

Nevertheless, this article may have its limitation as a single case (the restaurant and its three *Zangpiaos*) in the period from 2006 to 2010, though it offers a distinctive account of liquidity and oscillation of identities in the special period covering mass tourism, political riot and urbanization in Tibet. More cases could then be encouraged for a stronger base for theory building (Yin,1994).

Moreover, if *Zangpiaos* can be accepted theoretically as a new mobile group, a thick description (including their characteristics, purpose and motivation, sojourning behaviors, post-Zangpiao life, and so on), and a comparison with other mobile groups as well as their spiritual quest and new understanding of and attitude towards home would all call for further studies, as identity is intermixed with subjective search for home (Su, 2013) which is a contested space for identity building (Su,2014,p.50) and a connection of oneself with multiple places (Zhu,2018). ▲▲▲

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