

“Through Whose lens?” Notes on Competing Representations of Lurol

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“Our eyes are socio-culturally framed and gazing is a performance that orders, shapes and classifies, rather than reflects the world.”¹

inghai Province has for centuries been a peripheral borderland between the Tibetan and Chinese political ‘centres’. The presence of different linguistic, ethnic and religious groups, namely Tibetan, Hui, Han, Monguor and small Muslim groups like the Salar, has historically shaped the syncretic profile of the region, which Tibetans refer to as Amdo. Nowadays, attempts carried by the Chinese nation-state to promote social inclusiveness and ‘harmonious relations’ (Chinese: *hexie guanxi*) are ideologically motivated strategies to pursue larger plans concerning the modernization and economic development of China’s western regions. However, the clash between the Chinese national and the Tibetan local understandings of modernity and development emerges in multiple ways that deny a single broad-spectrum interpretation for the variety of social and political changes that are taking place in China’s contemporary minorities’ areas like Amdo.

In this context, religious rituals, revitalized after the reforms of the 1980s, have become an important ground to negotiate modernity through opposing and competing representations of Tibetan ‘tradition’ and religious life. Recent scholarship on rituals in Tibetan societies² has increasingly challenged the assumption of a monolithic Tibetan Buddhist world and has highlighted how rituals are adaptively transmuting in the specific socio-political milieus of contemporary Tibetan societies. Rather than being the reiterated expression of immutable religious beliefs, rituals are a privileged way to explore Tibetan communities’ transformative encounters with the national and global forces of modernity.

Based on participant observation of the celebration of Lurol (Klurol) in the three villages of Sa-dgyid, Sgo-dmar and Gling-rgya in

¹ Larsen 2006: 245.

² Cabezon 2010; Buffetrille 2012.

Rebgong County in 2014, this paper aims to define how the growing attendance of Han Chinese tourists to this particular ritual event triggers new tense dimensions of meanings, mediated by the use of camera in the space of the temple courtyard. This delimited and self-contained spatial frame hosts a dynamic interaction between the local and the national, which characterizes Lurol as the simultaneous enactment of the Han Chinese and Tibetan agencies' divergent ways of appropriating and representing Tibetans' religious lives.

Lurol is a propitiating ritual that takes place in many villages in the area of Rebgong County (Qinghai province) during the sixth lunar month. It is celebrated by each village according to a different time arrangement and lasts for three to six days. Because of its spectacular features, Lurol has acquired a special reputation in Amdo and every year it attracts an increasing number of Han Chinese tourists from inland China, along with foreign tourists.

Epstein (1998) provided a detailed description of the preparation and the sequence of group dancing, offerings and 'shamanic possession' that he witnessed during Lurol in Sa-dgyil village in the early 1990s. In his analysis, he defined the ritual as the celebration of the local Tibetan community identity, but he also foresaw that the impact of modernity could come to pose a threat to the performance of Lurol and its participants in the future. Nevertheless, he confidently concluded that the value of Lurol for the community of Rebgong would have for a long time prevailed over the commodification of the ritual:

"For the moment, therefore, the luröl ritual for the people of Rebgong is a vital and important religious act that links them to their place, their gods, and their Tibetanness. And no matter how colorful the attraction, or how important a financial factor it may become in Rebgong's modernized future, it has not yet, nor is it likely soon to become, a pure commodity. The luröl ritual clearly retains powerful local cultural significance. Its meanings will continue to be negotiated among the ritual actors, but as modernity continues to make its inroads on the people of Rebgong, its very performance may condemn its participants to a form of second-class citizenship in which they must choose between their ethnic or their national identities. Or worse, it may be transformed into a meaningless theatrical performance. But at present, Rebgong's luröl ritual reflects the breadth of the revival of Tibetan religion in China."³

³ Epstein 1998: 138.

Drawing on my fieldwork, undertaken in the same village more than twenty years later, at a first sight the aesthetics of Lurol have survived the passage of time without leaving any appreciable trace. Before the ritual began, each household in the village prepared offerings of alcohol, bread, sweets, fruits, and flowers that were collected and disposed in front of the entrance to the temple of Sa-dgyil. Afterwards, in faultless accordance with the sequence of actions outlined by Epstein, different members of the community participated into the gendered group dance. The unquestioned protagonist of Lurol was the *lhawa* (Tibetan: *lha-ba*), a figure found through Tibetan society, entrusted by the community to be a spirit-medium. During Lurol, he is possessed by the local mountain god, supervises the performance of the dancers and makes the appropriate offerings to the gods by pouring alcohol, yoghurt and rice on the ritual ground.

In Sgo-dmar and Gling-rgya villages, Lurol follows a similar sequence of events but it also includes some peculiar features. In Sgo-dmar a real-size sheep made of barley flour and butter is burnt on the fire arranged on the stone altar in front of the temple entrance, a reminiscence of the once performed sacrifice of a sheep that used to be burnt alive before 1950s.

In Gling-rgya the dancing culminated in the dramatic cutting of the *lhawa's* forehead and the offer of blood directly spread on the *thangka* of the mountain god. Chinese noisy fireworks accompanied the conclusion of the ritual and sent a bus of foreign tourists off.

As for 2014, no major change has apparently occurred in the ritual performance of Lurol in these three sites: on the surface, it can be still considered a Tibetan community event untouched by the pressuring force of modernity, the kind of well-preserved and unspoilt local tradition that tourists search for. Or not. The outside influence of tourists is in fact preponderantly penetrating into the local context of Lurol in subtle ways that are likewise affecting other Tibetan cultural phenomena in Amdo. Overall, Lurol ritual is increasingly fitting into the range of 'authentic' Tibetan traditions that have been assimilated into the logic of tourism-oriented cultural consumption in all Tibetan areas in China.

Epstein noticed how "the rush toward a market economy in China has created incentives to package and market ethnic culture for profit in China's ever-growing tourist industry."⁴ During the last decade, this trend has become a dominant model in orienting the development of Han Chinese tourism in Amdo. One most recent example is the mushrooming of tent restaurants set up during summer time. These odd colourful tents meet the tourists' expectations

⁴ Epstein 1998: 137.

for spending an unforgettable one-day immersion among Tibetan food delicacies stirred into loud music and stage dancing. Horse riding, butter tea and photos with locals in traditional costumes are also at hand in the surrounding grassland.

The image of Tibetans portrayed by this pervasive model of Han Chinese tourism clusters around a few stereotyped clichés and is reduced to be static, monolith and suspended in time. Tourists themselves demand and conform to this type of totalising, though fabricated, experience of Tibetan culture that not only romanticizes the natural environment and the people but also turns any manifestation of religious beliefs and rituals into an exotic attractive phenomenon.

The folklorization of Tibetan traditions for tourism consumption reflects the state's attitude to represent Tibetans as partaking of a supposed common standard core of values and images that define them. This model of homogenisation, which overlooks Tibetan local diversified cultural and religious expressions and promotes a monovocal narrative dominated by the state, anticipates the time and pre-determines the modalities of Han Chinese tourists' encounter with Tibetans in situ. By oversimplifying and even erasing Tibetan local diversity in history, social formations, beliefs and cultural expressions, Tibetans are merged into a totalizing stereotype, which urges them to occupy a subordinate position into the national frame.

Rituals like Lurol pose the local Tibetan community in direct confrontation with this imposed discourse of culture objectification and tourism consumption of their traditions. As we shall see, rather than passively accepting the role conveyed to them, Tibetans in Rebgong have developed their own symbolic references to self-represent their identity and, within this renewed framework, they are independently reflecting on the significance of Lurol in terms of cultural authenticity, beyond its religious value.

In summer 2014, among the green fields at the entrance of Rongwo township, the administrative centre of Rebgong County, a trilingual poster, realized by the Environment Protection Department of Rebgong County, advertised in Tibetan, Chinese and English a collage of photos as diverse as a glimpse of the annual bicycle racing around Kokonor lake and close-ups of participants to Lurol: the visual impact explicitly combined the two events into a single attractive message for the tourists and visitors alike.⁵

⁵ Photo by the author.



The written message that accompanied the photos, “The Month of Rabgong Costume Festival of Tibetans”, further suggested how to interpret the already clear visual message. Notably, despite portraying Lurol through photos, the poster didn’t mention it by name and didn’t feature it as a religious event: Lurol was only visually represented as an aesthetic, carnivalesque and entertaining festival. By combining the national sport event of the bicycle racing around Kokonor, the biggest lake in the region and a must-visit destination, with a local traditional festival, the local administration of Rebong is consciously exploiting a good occasion for becoming more integrated into the regional and national networks, by bringing outsiders to the local festival.

Nowadays, Lurol is framed as one among other leisure activities organized in Qinghai during the summer, when also the annual bicycle racing takes place. In this way, the poster adheres to the standard mode of representation implemented by the national and local government administration to promote a Tibetan festival in a simplified fashion that contributes to attract tourists, while eliminating its original religious significance.

The change of meaning of Lurol from a local religious festival to a tourist event entails an intentional act of appropriating Tibetan culture and charging it with a previously absent politicised dimension,

installed by the state. In Amdo, the representation of Tibetan traditions is a fertile terrain where the tension between the state and the local is articulated through contrasting ways of portraying Tibetans, their traditions and religious lives. Lurol, as a traditional ritual perpetuated in the contemporary setting, enhances new forms of hybrids and reflections about modernity from both the Tibetan and Chinese perspectives.

Ritual change can be particularly challenging to identify. As Bell pointedly noted: "Part of the dilemma of ritual change lies in the simple fact that rituals tend to present themselves as the unchanging, time-honoured customs of an enduring community."⁶ Immunity to transformation over time is often misunderstood to be an inherently connotative feature of rituals and research tends to focus on the traits of continuity with the past, whereas it overlooks the social and political context that makes rituals change.

Although Lurol has remained substantially unchanged in its formal aesthetic aspects, and for this same reason it has grown in popularity among tourists, its context of performance is changing: tourism has prompted its folklorization and is causing a gradual shift in the Tibetans' understanding of the ritual itself.

Although contemporary Tibetans quite obviously are not conforming to the outsiders' pressure to turn Lurol into a stage event, they have surely been troubled by the policies regulating it. Following the advent of Chinese army in 1958, Lurol has been at once affected by and responsive to the sociocultural and political context of Amdo that in the past sixty years have swung between central directives and local regulations, in a continuous reorientation of political campaigns towards the practice of religious rituals. First condemned and forbidden as 'superstition' during the Cultural Revolution and afterwards (1960s-1980s), then slowly authorized to be re-appropriated by the local community as a religious festival (1980-1990), Lurol has recently been exploited as a resource for tourism (1990-present). In every step of this process, Tibetans have been required to constantly adjust to the changing circumstances that were determined by political decisions taken very far away from Rebgong and implemented in loco.

Nowadays, Lurol reflects Tibetans' encounter with the modernity of consumption, embodied by the presence of Han Chinese in a Tibetan area, which is peripheral to the core of the Chinese nation. This centre-periphery dynamics is observable in all minorities' regions in China where Han Chinese tourism is the vehicle for what Oakes defined, in the context of Guizhou province, as "a ritualized

⁶ Bell 1992: 210-211.

encounter with modernity, [...] a staging of modernity, in which all the contradictions of a new political and economic order were served up for interpretation, understanding, and ultimately, reclamation by the villagers themselves."⁷

The encounter with Han tourists at Lurol provides local Tibetans with a specific venue to reflect onto their role in the local and national setting and onto the meaning of modernity itself. Bell observes how "despite many popular preconceptions and a number of anthropological models of ritual, ritual is not primarily a matter of unchanging tradition. On the contrary, some analysts now see ritual as a particularly effective means of mediating tradition and change, that is, as a medium for appropriating some changes while maintaining a sense of cultural continuity."⁸ Contemporary enactment of Lurol indeed displays this dynamic. By preserving a line of continuity with the past and at the same time digesting contemporary changes according to Tibetan terms, Lurol is a space rooted in Tibetan tradition but open to actively interact with Chinese modernity. While some Tibetans are gaining profit from this seasonal tourism economy, the very presence of tourists, their strolling around the town in fancy clothes, their disinhibit public behaviour, their expensive camera equipment and so on are important part of the direct daily confrontation with the symbols of Chinese modernity that all Tibetans are experiencing in Rebgong.

As a spatial movement from the eastern coastal area, Chinese tourism in Amdo is a relatively recent phenomenon, rooted in the post-80s economic growth of the country. The presence of Chinese tourists as de facto new participants to the ritual of Lurol is not explicitly welcomed or rejected by the local Tibetan community. However, tourism and video recording are interrelated activities in the experience and consumption process of Lurol that are undeniably playing a significant role as a major outside agent of transformation for the people of Rebgong. Lurol can be understood as a space where the Tibetan and Han Chinese involved parties negotiate the representation and reproduction of traditional and new meanings and rearticulate their power relations.

The unprecedented availability of videotaping tools has turned cameras into an essential part of the tourist's equipment, with the ambiguous result of documenting one's own memories, while violating others' own present. Despite having become more affordable, cameras still embody a Chinese economic status symbol, translated and reproduced through the hegemonic power of generating visual

⁷ Oakes 1998: 6-7.

⁸ Bell 1992: 251.

representations of Tibetans. At the same time, since Tibetans have still a comparatively limited access to sophisticated and expensive video technology, cell phones are becoming an efficient cheaper substitute to produce independent videotaping and react to the outsiders' representations.

In the context of Lurol, videotaping emerges as a versatile expression of applied narratology, an example of "what happens to narratology if it is imported into disciplines concerned with non-literary and non-fictional narratives."⁹ The symbolic role of cameras at Tibetan rituals and religious festivals is constructed and perceived in distinctive ways: the projection of different sets of Tibetans and Chinese imaginaries not only activate contrasting portraits of Tibetans' religious life but also reveals how camera is an emblematic narrative tool to explore the political changes occurring in post-Maoist Amdo from the micro-perspective of Lurol ritual. Being inspired by different documenting purposes, cameras reflect and negotiate unequal power relations in the confrontation between the Tibetan minority and the Han majority.

When tourists from inland China use their personal cameras to narrate Lurol, their eye has already been exposed to a variety of its visual representations, from those sponsored by the local government, like the poster mentioned above, to TV documentaries, blogs, and travelling experiences retold by acquaintances: having seen others' photos encourages to take more. When they come with their camera, tourists are likely to have already acquired some familiarity with what they will see and their photographing behaviour is very much conditioned by this set of interiorized images. Familiar visual representations become a reference model for *being there and taking photos* in conformity with previously consumed images of Lurol. Moreover, by adding their own memories to the existing material corpus of photos, they also authenticate and store their experience for sharing it with those who will see the photos back home.

Looking at some concrete examples from Lurol in Sa dgyil village, I noticed how Han Chinese tourists overlooked the progressive development of ritual activities and preferred to photograph isolated elements like details of Tibetans' dressing, jewel ornaments, and face portraits, especially of women and children. The choice of giving priority to these context-extrapolated elements has the effect to reduce the ritual to a background scene for their selected shots. Even when their lens was glazing at the *lharwa* or at individual dancers, the collective dimension of the dancing and the offering and the larger space of the courtyard with its Tibetan public were remarkably miss-

⁹ Heinen 2009: 196.

ing.

During informal conversations with Han Chinese professional and amateur photographers, who accidentally or purposely gathered in the temple courtyard to see Lurol, I repeatedly heard their enthusiastic comments about the spectacular combination of costumes and dancing that made Lurol so primitive (Chinese: *yuanshi*) and mysterious (Chinese: *shenmi*). However, none of my interlocutors knew more than some scarce and fragmented information about the primarily religious purpose of Lurol. This lack of sympathy for the Tibetan emic significance of the ritual performance can also partially account for the careless behaviour of tourists and photographers alike, both Han Chinese and foreigners, that were apparently unconscious that freely moving in the temple courtyard among the dancers, climbing on the roof surrounded by the smoke of juniper fumigation, and standing at the temple entrance facing the procession led by the *lhawa* to get a closer shot or a better frame were not sensitive behaviours. Although the Tibetan public sitting along the perimeter of the courtyard didn't openly manifest to be bothered by the invasive behaviour of tourists, the *lhawa* in Gomar village was less tolerant and when tourists started to deliberately invading the space inside the circle described by the dancers, he angrily asked them to step back, with the scarce result that they still stood in-between the public and the ritual performance, in a way that their presence could not be ignored.

Based on actual observation, it won't be farfetched to claim that Han Chinese tourists' experience of Lurol means essentially to photograph it. Visual reproduction canalizes the tension toward appropriating this Tibetan ritual by turning it into the stable form of a photograph. In this respect, it is worth reporting the following passage, where Larsen poignantly comments on the co-emergence of experience, tourism, photography and objectification and cites a well-known early work of Sontag:¹⁰

"Sontag made the case that photography dramatically transformed the perception of the world by turning it into a 'society of spectacles' where circulating images over-power reality: 'reality' becomes touristic, an item for visual consumption. The ability of photography to objectify the world as an exhibition, to arrange the entire globe for visual consumption." In Sontag's words: *"It would not be wrong to speak of people to have a compulsion to photograph: to turn experience itself into a way of seeing. Ultimately, having an*

¹⁰ Sontag 1977.

experience becomes identical with taking a photograph of it, and participating in a public event comes more and more to be equivalent to looking at it in photographed form. [...] Today everything exist to end in a photograph."¹¹

In any cultural setting tourism inevitably brings along a critical discussion on the objectifying role that photography acquires in the relationship between the photographer and the photographed. By videotaping Lurol as the performance of a 'costume carnival' representation, Han Chinese tourists condense a set of ethnic and social hierarchies in a visual format that portrays Tibetans as traditional and cut off from modernity in the broader national context. The camerawork of tourists also contributes to objectify Tibetan as statically inscribed in their travel experience, wherein they acquire all the characteristics of a fixed exotic Other in dichotomous opposition to the mobility to which Han are entitled, thanks to unrestrained freedom of movement within the country and better economic conditions.

Chinese tourism is indeed a product of the economic development of the past thirty years that followed the opening up of a market economy. Its growth as a social phenomenon is increasingly reflected by photography, which has become an emblematic expression of the contrasting dimensions of Chinese modernity in its Han Chinese centres and minorities' peripheries. Already defined as "a ritual practice of tourism,"¹² photography is the utmost ritual of Chinese modernity that inevitably clashes with traditional Tibetan rituals like Lurol as well as with other religious manifestations.

The process of imagining and defining Tibetans precedes the photo and, to a considerable extent, predetermines its content. The intrusive usage of cameras, accompanied by tourists' inappropriate behaviour during Lurol, characterizes many Han Chinese visual misrepresentations and misappropriations of Tibetan religious objects and symbols. Prayer flags give one example. Being a must iconographic component of photos taken near mountains, lakes and other natural sites, prayer flags are not only framed as a colourful spot in the background of portrait photos but are also held, stepped on, and sit on by Han Chinese tourists, like we can see in the photos posted and commented by Tibetans through the social network of wechat with these words: "Prayer flags blown by the wind embody Tibetans' wish for peace, favourable conditions, happiness and health. There are reli-

¹¹ Larsen 2006: 242.

¹² Larsen 2006: 241.

gious scriptures printed on prayer flags which, in the Tibetan view, are read when prayer flags are blown. Despite being so holy, prayer flags are stepped on by stupid tourists. I just want to say to the uneducated and unmannered tourist in the photo: please have a sufficient understanding of a local customs and bring respect when you travel.”¹³



Rather than being passive subjects of photographing objectification, Tibetans are actively reacting and engaging with the representation of their religious lives. Bell observes that “the modes of social interaction afforded by the ubiquity of television and video, by the unprecedented levels of tourist travel, and by the increasingly multicultural societies are having an effect not only on why, what, and when people ritualize but also on how we conceive of ritual itself.”¹⁴ During Lurol, the very presence of tourists and their videotaping activity is indirectly encouraging Tibetans to use a local eye to produce their own visual documentation of the ritual through the use of cameras and cell phones. In this respect, Chinese tourism has played the quite paradoxical role of empowering Tibetans’ agency in Rebgong by fostering the production of their alternative competing represen-

¹³ The photos reproduced hereafter were anonymously posted on wechat in spring 2014.

¹⁴ Bell 2009: 242.

tations of Lurol, in opposition to its carnavalization as an event for tourists' consumption. "Photographers and films acquire even greater autonomy when the camera is handed over to 'the natives'"¹⁵ and in Rebgong videotaping has turned from an objectifying modern technique monopolized by Han Chinese tourists to a possible approach handed by Tibetans to actively deal with and represent modernity instead of submitting to it.

In 2014, when engaging in the activity of videotaping Lurol from the perimeter of the courtyard, no Tibetan walked inside the dancing circle or too close to it. Holding their cameras and cell phones at its margins, they displayed a totally different involvement and purpose from that of Han tourists: Tibetan zoom was in fact not anonymous, it focused on their children, nephews, grandchildren, and children of their friends and neighbours taking part in the dance. Handing a camera became a way to reinforce community solidarity through the personal choices of what to photograph, which may be interpreted as a more or less conscious response to tourists' standardized videotaping.

Interestingly, Tibetan videotaping was not limited to the moment of the Lurol ritual enactment but covered the entire chronological stretch from the days that preceded Lurol to the afterwards celebration. By visually documenting the temporal development of the ritual, its domestic atmosphere becomes effectively incorporated within its larger public context: the preparation and decoration of offerings, the naphthalene-smelling clothes worn only on special occasions, the fabrication of ritual objects to substitute those already consumed by use (like the sheep skin drum in the photo) but also the relaxing scene of family and friends' gathering for eating and drinking for hours after the ritual was over.¹⁶ The subjects of all these photos embody a Tibetan cohesive and coherent vision of Lurol as a community event, an annual celebration for all its members, and in this perspective the divergence with tourists' videotaping is evident.

¹⁵ Chaplin 1994: 212.

¹⁶ I am grateful to the families who hosted me during Lurol. The following photos were taken by Tsering Rgyal.





Beyond its exclusively religious significance, Tibetans are starting to elaborate Lurol as an important cultural event, a manifestation of the uniqueness of Rebgong and its celebrated Tibetan authenticity and legacy inherited from the past as the centre of thangka painting, the seat of Rongwo monastery, the second largest monastic institution in Amdo, the hometown of Gedun Chopel, the founder of Tibetan modern literature, and finally as a fast-urbanising town where locals demand that pure Tibetan is spoken.

This new cultural dimension of Lurol can be partly related to the national and international discourses on the recognition and preservation of cultural heritage linked to local discourses of ethnic pride. The urgency in documenting Lurol emerges also from some Tibetans' search for western researchers' theoretical and methodological knowledge to explain it as a cultural phenomenon and not something primitive to be ashamed of. In the effort to reframe what they are familiar with since they were born and rearticulate it in different terms to fit into modernity, Tibetans seek anthropology, folklore and any other subject label alike to provide 'scientific legitimacy' for a renewed approach to Lurol and its evaluation not only as a religious festival but also as an expression of local culture.

As a counterbalance to this laic trend, monks and part of the educated Tibetans in Rebgong insert Lurol within a discourse of primitivism and neglect its religious efficaciousness as superstition and folk religion. During informal conversations with a group of young

monks from the Gelukpa monastery of Mgo-dmar, they insistently repeated that monastic vows forbid them to attend Lurol because it celebrates the low pantheon of mundane gods. Not only that. In the attempt to make his thoughts more explicit, one monk asserted that the symbolic offer of human blood at Lurol in Gling-rgya or its substitutive substances in Sa-dgyil and Sgo-dmar are clear signs of the primitiveness of Lurol, which he further defined as a spectacle for the villagers, similar to the performance of African shamans...

Orthodox Buddhism and the Chinese state embody two distinct discourses of official authority, which tend to coincide in downplaying the religious significance of Lurol. Buddhism undermines its very ritual validation by more or less explicitly relegating it to an expression of folklore; similarly, the Chinese state, represented by the local administration, highlights and exploits Lurol for tourism consumption. However, bringing Lurol back to the perspective of the laic village community, this ritual still fully preserves its religious significance and is now also appreciated and celebrated as an expression of local culture.

Tibetans in Rebgong reinterpret their traditional religious activities and festivals like Lurol to generate discourses on their community identity, alternative to those imposed onto them by outsiders' representations. The process of creating a space for preserving the authenticity of Lurol in a modern setting is enacted through Tibetan multivocal responses that challenge the imposition of cultural standardization, pursued by both the state and the tourist. Tibetans indeed insert Lurol within an inclusive frame made of common memory of the past, common geographic origin, and family connections: these concrete reference marks support their persistence in renovating corporate local identities. An array of ethnic and cultural marks of Tibetan self-representation, such as religious festivals, material culture, traditional food and clothing, strengthen the existing social networks and promote its unity.

The movement towards corporate identities is an answer to the State's homogenising stereotypization of Tibetans, who depart from their diversified local settings to establish their own set of symbolic and material culture that are alternative from those imposed onto them. Clothes worn at Lurol are a case in point. Villagers expect everyone to wear traditional Tibetan clothes at Lurol, no matter if they come to participate in the ritual or to sit in the public. Failing to do so is criticized and perceived as a lack of participation and sense of community belonging, to the point that the few Tibetans wearing western clothes were afraid to be beaten by the *lhawa* and sit in the corner to be less visible.

For lay Tibetans Lurol is still and foremost the celebration of the community ties, an essential part of their local identity that needs to be re-articulated to fit modern challenges, among which the main one is Han Chinese tourism and its visual representation. However, tourism is not passively accepted but it prompts Tibetans' own encounter and ways of dealing with modernity and its tools. Overall, in the context of Lurol, Tibetans and Han Chinese make their respective use of camera as a tool to foster two opposite arrays of representations: primitiveness, stereotypization and exoticization versus local pride, community identity and income.

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