

## Postprint: Video Mediatization and Communication Branding of the Viral Ding Zhen IP

**Authors:** Zhang Ziyi

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### Abstract

Ding Zhen, a young man from Litang County, Garze, Sichuan Province, frequently topped the hot search lists on social media platforms. Witnessed by netizens, he transformed from an ordinary individual to an internet celebrity, and subsequently from an internet celebrity to an employee of a state-owned enterprise, while receiving public commendation from official media such as People's Daily and CCTV News, thereby generating heated discussion for a period of time. Based on the phenomenon of internet celebrity Ding Zhen's sudden rise to fame in the era of big data, this study provides an in-depth summary of online information regarding this incident, retrospectively examines the vertical timeline of his popularity, combines communication and sociological theories to analyze the causes and background of this phenomenon, explores the underlying connotations and social value, investigates the commercial logic behind his fame and its role in driving rural revitalization, and analyzes the government-led personal IP cultivation approach, thereby offering new insights for poverty alleviation and urban cultural promotion.

### Full Text

## The Video Mediatization and Brand Communication of the Viral Ding Zhen IP

**Beijing Institute of Graphic Communication, Beijing 102600**

**Abstract:** Ding Zhen, a young man from Litang County, Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, has frequently topped social media trending lists. Witnessed by netizens, he transformed from an ordinary individual to an internet celebrity, and subsequently became an employee of a state-owned enterprise, earning praise from official media outlets including *People's Daily* and CCTV News, which generated widespread discussion. Based on Ding Zhen's viral fame in the era of big data and the internet, this paper examines the

event through a comprehensive analysis of online information, tracing the timeline of his rise to prominence. By integrating communication and sociological theories, it explores the causes and background of the “Ding Zhen phenomenon,” investigates its underlying connotations and social value, and analyzes the business logic and its role in poverty alleviation and rural revitalization. The study also examines government-led personality IP development strategies, offering new insights for poverty alleviation efforts and urban cultural promotion.

**Keywords:** Personality IP; Mainstream Media; Urban Communication; Internet Celebrity

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### Status and Classification of Ding Zhen’s Popularity

On November 11, 2020, a video posted on Douyin (TikTok) received over 2.7 million likes. The content featured a young man in Tibetan attire with tanned skin and clear eyes smiling at the camera for less than ten seconds. This young man was Ding Zhen. His handsome face and shy smile alone garnered nearly 3 million likes. After the video was reposted by a Weibo influencer with 2.5 million followers on November 12, Ding Zhen’s WeChat Index skyrocketed by 4,886.46% on November 13, with a 138.94% increase on November 14 and 279.3% on November 15. This phenomenon attracted the attention of talent agencies across China, who rushed to Litang County, Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, hoping to sign contracts with him. Simultaneously, discussions about Ding Zhen’s future spread across social media platforms, and the viral nature of internet propagation catapulted him to instant fame.

On November 17, the topic “Should Ding Zhen Leave the Grasslands?” trended on Weibo, sparking public debate. Ding Zhen responded, “I won’t leave; I want to stay in my hometown,” and posted his employment photo, which received 370,000 likes. On November 18, Ding Zhen opened his personal Weibo account, and by the afternoon of November 19, his follower count had reached 1.16 million. That same day, Ding Zhen began his first livestream on a major platform, ranking third in viewership within half an hour, with a cumulative audience of 4.2 million. On November 25, the Sichuan Garze tourism promotional video “Ding Zhen’s World,” co-produced by Time Difference Island and the Garze Culture and Tourism Bureau, was released on his Weibo account. In an interview on November 26, when asked “If you didn’t consider travel costs, where would you most want to go?” Ding Zhen replied, “Lhasa!” This response triggered another wave of trending topics, including “Where Exactly is Ding Zhen’s Hometown?” and “Tibet Wins Without Trying,” each garnering over 100 million views.

Ding Zhen’s rapid rise also captured the attention of official media. On November 27, CCTV News anchor Hai Xia praised him on the “Anchor’s Commentary” program. On November 28, *People’s Daily* published a commentary stating that “The beauty behind Ding Zhen deserves more traffic.” On the same day, Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying posted three tweets promoting Ding

Zhen, including one featuring his smiling photo with the caption: “A sunny, innocent smile.” This not only sparked domestic discussion but also received likes, retweets, and comments from foreign netizens. In a CCTV News interview on November 29, Ding Zhen expressed his happiness about his fame and his hope to do more promotional work for his hometown. The official *People’s Daily* Review WeChat account also published a commentary, describing Ding Zhen’s story as embodying “the self-improving power of growing up in adversity” and calling for more “positive energy” internet celebrities.

Unlike other internet celebrities who sign with talent agencies to monetize their traffic, Ding Zhen signed with Litang County Cultural, Tourism and Sports Investment Development Co., Ltd., a state-owned company under the local State-owned Assets Supervision and Administration Commission (SASAC), becoming an official tourism ambassador for Litang County. In promotional materials, the locally-born Ding Zhen wears various styles of Tibetan robes, his tanned face adorned with turquoise earrings. Everything from his attire to his appearance reflects local characteristics, and his personal image as a pure, kind, polite, and natural young man makes him even more vibrant and charming. This image directly associates Ding Zhen with Litang and Sichuan, enabling the county to function as a “humanistic landscape” and better promote its geography, culture, and tourism. Against the backdrop of striving to achieve the Two Centenary Goals, this also helps Litang County win its poverty alleviation battle, setting an example for other impoverished counties and promoting the spread of ethnic culture to build cultural confidence. Behind Ding Zhen’s transformation from internet celebrity to state-owned enterprise employee lies the local government’s proactive effort to capture traffic and produce quality content. This attempt demonstrates that positive guidance of internet celebrities by the government can maximize the value of traffic, and using them for urban image communication has become a new path to enhance city visibility.

## Causes and Background of Ding Zhen’s Popularity

### **Technological Empowerment: The Rise of Individual Narrativization**

Technological development has lowered the threshold for users to share information. According to the *2021 China Online Audio-Visual Development Research Report*, by June 2021, China’s online audio-visual user base had reached 929 million, with the industry scale exceeding 600 billion yuan. With the popularization of mobile internet terminals, everyone can use short videos for direct social sharing, and individual narratives have begun to proliferate in cyberspace.

Ding Zhen’s fame began with a short video less than ten seconds long. In subsequent videos spread across social media, he became the protagonist of his own narrative, sharing his name and hometown in halting Mandarin, telling us about his horse named “Pearl.” This individual narrative is closer to ordinary people’s daily lives, making it easier to bridge the distance between the sharer and netizens and generate emotional resonance. The emergence of short videos not only lowers the communication threshold but also grants users the right to

receive diverse content.

Ding Zhen's popularity is inseparable from the technical support behind social media. His life possesses irreproducible uniqueness—his 原生态 skin, clear eyes, and the rustic quality that people yearn for. Living at the foot of the Gnie Snow Mountain, far from urban centers, these unique characteristics made his video stand out among massive content, harvesting numerous likes, comments, and shares. Under algorithmic recommendation mechanisms, the platform prioritized his content, further amplifying his traffic.

**Uses and Gratifications: Ideal Pursuit of Scarce Resources** The “Uses and Gratifications” theory, proposed by American communication scholar Katz in *The Uses of Mass Communications*, views audiences as individuals with specific needs whose media consumption behaviors are activities based on those needs. Audiences satisfy their needs through media contact and usage, representing a classic theory for studying audience motivation. The video that first attracted netizens' attention was an unfiltered short video posted on Douyin. Having grown tired of the homogeneous, heavily-filtered beautiful faces common on short video platforms, netizens' pursuit of Ding Zhen's unmodified, authentic beauty actually reflects their aversion to standardized aesthetics and their desire for scarce aesthetic resources that satisfy their specific needs.

Subsequent videos featuring Ding Zhen showcased an idyllic pastoral lifestyle. In the Sichuan Garze tourism promotional video “Ding Zhen's World,” Ding Zhen showed his daily life: horse racing on the grasslands, washing his face with snow water from Gnie Snow Mountain, herding cattle with his brother, and lying on the grass all day. For urban netizens accustomed to reinforced concrete jungles and regular routines, this alternative lifestyle naturally evokes longing. The comment sections of Ding Zhen's Weibo videos exploded with admiration for his life and praise for Litang's scenery. Ding Zhen and his unique lifestyle satisfy the aesthetic needs of contemporary Chinese internet users. His popularity caters to netizens' psychological and cultural needs in the internet society, representing a breakthrough of scarce aesthetics under homogeneous aesthetic standards.

**Symbolic Memes: Otherness Imagination and Symbolic Expression** Internet memes are units of popular culture created, shared, and experienced by internet users through dissemination, imitation, and transformation. According to Shifman, the internet's high interactivity, virtuality, and accessibility provide fertile ground for memes and positively contribute to the prosperity of online culture. In Ding Zhen's viral videos, his tanned and weathered face carved by the plateau environment, iconic Tibetan attire, youthful and wild appearance, and pure, innocent eyes are infinitely amplified against the backdrop of grand, mysterious music and slow-motion editing techniques.

In consumer society, the symbolization of most items is mythologization, and worshipping item symbols means worshipping item symbol myths. In Ding

Zhen's videos, characters, environments, costumes, and music trigger people's primal imagination about exotic cultures. His dark red, slightly rough face symbolizes primal wildness; typical Tibetan attire evokes imagination about mysterious Tibetan culture; and the geographically distinctive landscape beckons people to visit. These symbols construct people's imagination of the "other," which they reconstruct, express, and disseminate according to their own cognition.

The cultural conflict between the "primitive, simple, and natural" Tibetan culture and "modern, hypocritical, and artificial" urban culture attracts audience attention, conveying a sense of life consciousness, aesthetic awakening, and primal passion. Audiences perceive, intervene, and construct the signifiers of these symbols. Guided by these symbols, people with curiosity and voyeuristic psychology explore Ding Zhen's life, region, and work from different perspectives, pushing the event to wave after wave of public opinion peaks. These fragmented visual texts full of mysterious romanticism are rapidly processed by netizens' imagination and endowed with deeper meanings such as innocence, kindness, and simplicity, triggering empathy and establishing deeper emotional connections with audiences.

### **Connotation and Value: Transformation from Aesthetic Carnival to Social Value**

In Bakhtin's carnival theory, the "typical characters" that provide "carnivalistic merriment" embody a special lifestyle—one that is both real and ideal. From the audience's perspective, internet celebrity products require precise emotional linkage with audiences throughout the planning, production, release, and feedback processes. Whether the presentation is primitive or refined, funny or serious, it must satisfy audience desires, fill voids, or divert attention. Ding Zhen's initial popularity ignited audience aesthetic demands. He did not conform to local traditional aesthetic standards—his thick, textured hair, asymmetrical turquoise earrings, and wild yet pure eyes differed completely from the refined beauties typically seen on short video platforms and even from the locally admired "tall and mighty" image. Labels such as "sweet, wild, pure, and real" were attached to him with clear emotional resonance. These visual images that subverted conventional order satisfied audiences' aesthetic needs, emotional release, and longing for alternative lifestyles in the "first world" (the real world), representing the decisive factors that made Ding Zhen a phenomenon-level internet celebrity.

When the topic "Should Ding Zhen Leave the Grasslands?" topped Weibo's trending list, netizens declared they wanted to "protect our Ding Zhen's innocence." The official *People's Daily Review* WeChat account also published a commentary calling on people to "cherish innocence." This reflected both the audience's appreciation for simplicity and the public's resistance to materialism and capital manipulation in the real world. Living up to expectations, Ding Zhen chose to sign with a local state-owned enterprise, continue his education, and promote local tourism development. This news again topped the trending

list, with the convergence of traffic reflecting how Ding Zhen's choice once again satisfied public emotional needs.

The process of Ding Zhen's sustained traffic generation is a process of satisfying audiences' imagination of an ideal world and alternative lifestyles. Upholding natural simplicity without being swept away by traffic or manipulated by capital, Ding Zhen's traffic has transformed into a symbolic representation of local tourism development after settling down. This represents the ideal shaping of typical characters that meet inner needs in the carnival square. In the real world, not everyone can possess Ding Zhen's environment and innocence, but under carnival conditions, the majority of the public gains a sense of participation, achieving what Bakhtin called "a life in which all participate actively."

### **Commercial Path of Ding Zhen's Popularity: Transforming Attention into Productivity**

After becoming famous, Ding Zhen did not follow the conventional development path of other internet celebrities. Instead, he signed with Litang County Cultural, Tourism and Sports Investment Development Co., Ltd., a state-owned company under the local SASAC, becoming a state-owned enterprise employee. Since then, Ding Zhen has actively participated in Litang County's tourism and cultural promotion through livestreaming and other means, using his personal traffic to drive local cultural and tourism development, enabling more people to experience local customs and history through online media or physical visits. The massive attention attracted by Ding Zhen's traffic has been transformed into productive forces promoting local cultural and tourism industry development.

Canadian communication political economist Dallas Smythe's "audience commodity theory" posits that what mass media actually produces is not news, entertainment, or other content, but rather transmits a kind of temptation to audiences—free "gifts, bribes, or free lunches" that attract audience attention and sell audiences as commodities to advertisers. Thus, attention possesses productive attributes; the process of audience attention consumption can be regarded as productive labor that continuously creates added value, enabling the dominant subjects or platforms of the attention economy to obtain profits.

Subsequent developments have proven that signing Ding Zhen as a state-owned enterprise employee—developing under protection, revitalizing Ding Zhen and the beautiful resources behind him, and transforming traffic attention into productivity—is the key to channeling traffic in the right direction.

### **A Multi-Win Strategy: Converting Attention into Productivity**

The most important medium in transforming attention into productivity is "temptation." Through tempting welfare policies that stimulate and catalyze the rapid monetization of audience attention, audiences can also benefit from these welfare policies, receiving spiritual or material compensation.

Following Ding Zhen's rapid rise to fame, his hometown Litang County in Garze Prefecture, Sichuan Province, also gained widespread attention. Data shows that in the last week of November 2020, Litang's search volume surged 620%. On November 17, the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Tourism Bureau's official Weibo account (@Garze Culture and Tourism) initiated the "How Handsome is Our Kangba Man" campaign, launching a three-step strategy to transform Ding Zhen from a "grassroots internet celebrity" into an "official tourism ambassador." On November 18, Litang County SASAC's state-owned company, Garze Prefecture Litang County Cultural, Tourism and Sports Investment Development Co., Ltd., confirmed that Ding Zhen had been signed as a formal employee. Thus, Ding Zhen transformed from a "grassroots internet celebrity" into an "official tourism ambassador."

On November 25, the promotional video "Ding Zhen's World," featuring Ding Zhen's perspective of Garze, was co-produced by cultural marketing company Time Difference Island and the Garze Prefecture Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism Bureau, and launched on platforms including Weibo (@Garze Culture and Tourism). Ding Zhen officially became his hometown's tourism ambassador. Meanwhile, the Garze Prefecture government not only enhanced the regional and cultural connotations of the "Ding Zhen" label through official endorsement but also implemented economic stimulus measures, formulating tourism preferential policies including free admission to scenic spots, half-price hotels, and discounted air tickets to promote Garze's beauty. This transformed online traffic into tangible air ticket, accommodation, and catering revenue, achieving a win-win situation for netizens and Sichuan.

Wang Guangzhi, deputy director of the Garze Prefecture Culture, Radio, Television and Tourism Bureau, stated in an interview that since the free admission policy was officially implemented on November 15, the 67 monitored scenic spots in the prefecture received a year-on-year increase of 112.31% in visitor volume within just two weeks. Such massive growth has injected a shot in the arm for Sichuan's cultural and tourism industry post-pandemic and represents a significant step forward in Garze's cultural and tourism poverty alleviation efforts.

### **The "Talent Scramble" Signals a Joint Effort in Cultural and Tourism Poverty Alleviation**

This seemingly competitive yet actually collaborative cultural and tourism promotion effort once again pushed Sichuan and Tibet into the spotlight, catalyzed by Weibo polls asking "Where did you think Ding Zhen was from?" and "Where do you most want to go?" Local cultural and tourism departments scrambled to showcase their beautiful resources through various creative techniques. Topics such as "How Hard Sichuan is Fighting for Ding Zhen" and "Tibet Has the Joy of Winning Without Trying" rushed to the top of Weibo's trending list. While netizens enjoyed the spectacle, cultural and tourism departments across the country couldn't sit still, triggering a nationwide scramble.

As Ding Zhen's signing company's responsible person stated in an interview: "For a small county to become popular once is not easy. When traffic comes, using it wisely and flexibly to create a synergistic effect, supplemented by modern media promotion methods, can transform attention into productivity and create greater commercial benefits."

### **Evaluation: Ding Zhen's Communication Level in the Communication Field**

From a personal development perspective, Ding Zhen, born in 2001, is under 20—the age for receiving nine-year compulsory education. However, as the eldest son in his family, Ding Zhen has never attended school and bears the responsibility of herding cattle for his family. In many remote areas, parents' educational attitudes are generally lax, and compulsory education is often not implemented. Ding Zhen is not an isolated case; his younger cousin also dropped out after primary school to herd cattle. With the popularization of nine-year compulsory education and growing awareness of the importance of education, Ding Zhen's sudden fame has strengthened the implementation of compulsory education in remote mountainous areas. While others might be pulled into product endorsement when they become famous, Ding Zhen was pulled into education. Fans from across the country sent him books, and Ding Zhen's wish evolved from "wanting a little horse to win a race" to "hoping to finish reading the books sent by fans."

From a professional media perspective, the information explosion era of the internet means that hot topics equal money and traffic equals wealth. Professional journalists chasing hot topics is part of their job. Behind the generation of hot topics lie certain necessities and contingencies, and the value orientation of hot topics requires professional journalists to excavate. On the surface, Ding Zhen's popularity is simply a handsome young man from the countryside who won netizens' affection through his looks and video atmosphere. However, Litang's cultural and tourism units grasped Ding Zhen's unique characteristics, firmly seizing on his differences from other internet celebrities by amplifying his innocence, kindness, youth, and natural qualities. They combined Ding Zhen's personal image with Litang, Sichuan, making him an image ambassador for a charming rural area. Although this is a government action aimed at promoting rural development, its operation process is similar to commercial development and public relations. Therefore, professional media have broadened government service methods and improved government work efficiency by creating a good start and setting an example for tourism and cultural development in other regions, thereby strengthening the government image and facilitating government work transformation.

From a national strategic perspective, Ding Zhen's popularity not only received extensive coverage from domestic media but also support from CCTV News and Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying. His sudden fame brought critical opportunities for local tourism development. In 2020 alone, Litang County

held events such as the Horse Racing Festival and the Kangba Men Beauty Contest, allowing more people to discover the beauty of Litang, Sichuan. Behind Ding Zhen's viral event lies the arduous efforts of successive poverty alleviation teams. The Fifth Plenary Session of the 19th CPC Central Committee explicitly proposed prioritizing agricultural and rural development, comprehensively promoting rural revitalization, and achieving effective connection between consolidating and expanding poverty alleviation achievements and rural revitalization. The signing of Ding Zhen with Litang County Cultural, Tourism and Sports Investment Development Co., Ltd. effectively promoted this connection. By appointing him as the local tourism ambassador and promptly launching the promotional video "Ding Zhen's World," the government employed a combination of online and offline marketing to focus public attention on Garze, Sichuan, increasing Litang's search volume by 620 times. Agriculture as the foundation, cultural creativity as the soul, and people's livelihood as the essence—rural revitalization requires local governments to play their promotional cards well. A short video made Ding Zhen famous, turning him into a local tourism ambassador with a "deputy manager" position on Douyin and Weibo, transforming recognition into understanding. This demonstrates the local government's confidence and determination to develop its cultural and tourism industry. It also tells us that cultural propaganda should fully utilize internet marketing media, focus on self-development, combine local characteristics, identify local advantages, build local cultural brands, explore ecological agricultural development, integrate nostalgia into ecology, transform ecology into industry, proactively find highlights, actively leverage bright spots, and strive to align every step with promotional timing to capture new markets for local products.

### **Specific Recommendations for Government-Led Internet Celebrity Development**

Behind Ding Zhen's viral fame lies years of careful preparation and rapid response from Sichuan Province and Litang County. Years ago, Litang County identified cultural and tourism industry as a key direction for poverty alleviation, vigorously developing scenic area construction and promotion. In recent years, Litang has deeply implemented the "All-Area Tourism" strategy to strengthen the supporting role of the tourism industry. According to the Litang County People's Government website, in 2019, Litang County received 1.74 million tourists, generating comprehensive tourism revenue of 1.91 billion yuan. It is precisely because of years of preparation that Litang County could quickly respond with plans to receive and utilize the resources brought by Ding Zhen, revitalizing its beautiful resources through scientific and reasonable means.

Facing further development opportunities, Litang County has made ample preparations in both hardware and software, continuously refining Litang's cultural symbols to form unique narrative discourse. Based on integrated communication across new and old media, it has broken through temporal and spatial limitations of information dissemination to create the Litang brand and

shape its image.

In the chess game of promotion, this impoverished county on the plateau has long been preparing and testing the waters, only lacking a chance to stand out. As early as 2019, Litang County had already built a county-level converged media center to “break through the last kilometer of grassroots promotion,” creating a “One Platform, One Network, One Micro, One App” new media matrix. It opened official accounts on Douyin, Kuaishou, Toutiao, and Sina Weibo, continuously innovating content, forms, and methods to tell Litang’s stories in ways that resonate with audiences in the all-media era. Additionally, Litang County Converged Media Center has conducted multiple live broadcast activities with Garze Daily’s Kangba Media and media companies inside and outside Sichuan Province, exploring work experience in live activities for Tibetan area county-level converged media centers.

Whether in terms of beautiful resource reserves, ideological concept updates, or reserves in information technology and talent, Litang County and Garze Prefecture were prepared. Therefore, when opportunity struck, they could respond quickly, strike while the iron is hot, transform attention into productivity, and convert an individual into a “productive force” that drives local development. Media technology development has facilitated precise communication of city images and constructed urban meaning spaces through highly recognizable cultural symbols and narrative discourse. This kind of communication that attempts to span time and space satisfies people’s desire for immersive experiences to a certain extent. Therefore, making good use of new media technology, continuously updating communication concepts and methods, and basing efforts on local characteristics are essential to quickly seize monetization opportunities and revitalize content resources when traffic waves arrive.

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