

# Rural Tourism Development Boosted by the Internet Celebrity Ding Zhen

## -- A Case of Litang County

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### Abstract

The Tibetan boy Ding Zhen became popular on the Internet because of a short video of a smile. Behind his smile, Ding Zhen attracted netizens because of his purity, simplicity and non-pretentiousness. Ding Zhen's popularity also brought people's attention to his hometown-Litang County of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. Litang County was originally a small county that has just taken off its poverty alleviation hat, but it has also received a lot of attention and improved local economic conditions. This article aims to explore a new way to revitalize rural tourism by digging from the phenomenon of Ding Zhen's popularity.

### Keywords

Ding Zhen; Litang County; Rural revitalization; Tourism.

### 1. Ding Zhen Became Popular Unexpectedly: I Just Want to Buy A Bucket of Instant Noodles

On the day of Double Eleven in 2020, when the major netizens were busy emptying their shopping carts, a Tibetan boy named "Ding Zhen" suddenly appeared in the public's field of vision, and a "sweet and wild" wind swept across the Internet.

Ding Zhen's unexpected popularity stems from a short video posted on the Tiktok by a netizen named "Brother Bo, the Smile Collector". In the video, a young guy dressed in Tibetan costumes walks towards the camera with a smile. Ding Zhen had a dark complexion and narrowed his eyes under the strong sunlight unique to the plateau, but still couldn't hide his clear and naive eyes. He smiled shyly and naturally. The entire video was less than ten seconds, but this smile made the netizens who saw the video continue to recall. Some people say that this is the unpackaged, simplest, most "wild" and most "original" smile.

This short video was madly forwarded on major network platforms, and the number of clicks was constantly refreshed. It was later revealed by relevant media that Ding Zhen only met the photographer "Hu Bo" who was photographing the smiles of Tibetans while on the way to "buy instant noodles." What Hu Bo did not expect was that this short video would bring such a big response.

Ding Zhen, 20 years old, a Tibetan man, spends most of his time grazing cattle and digging cordyceps. Ding Zhen appeared in the hot search with this image. There is constant discussion on the Internet, and some people speculate that this is a premeditated hype. Like other Internet celebrities, the next step is to live broadcast the goods. What is unexpected is that Ding Zhen signed a contract with a local state-owned enterprise and became a staff member.

## 2. The world of Ding Zhen-Litang County

Six days after Ding Zhen became popular, the Jet Lag Island filming group arrived in Litang and cooperated with the local government to plan to shoot the promotional film "Ding Zhen's World" in Litang County of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

So what does Ding Zhen's world look like? Cow herding, horse riding, snow-capped mountains, grasslands, temples, white pagodas, friends who raced together, and endless Tibetan love songs... This is the world of Ding Zhen and the epitome of every Tibetan people living in Litang. Ding Zhen said, "The outside world is huge, but I still love my hometown very much. I want to just stay in my own world like this."

Ding Zhen's "World" Litang is a small county located in Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. It officially took off its status as a poor county in February 2020.

### 2.1. Geography

The average elevation of Litang is 4,014 meters, while the elevation of Lhasa is only 3,700 meters. An ordinary small county town has neither Mount Everest, the world's peak, nor complete infrastructure. After all, six years ago, there were even a handful of hotels in Litang County that could provide hot water 24 hours a day. It is really hard to get Litang County out of the circle. But fortunately, after Ding Zhen became popular, after Ding Zhen became an internet sensation and claimed himself "the Son of Genie" in his video, people turn their attention to the Snow Mountain of Genie in Litang County.

Genie Snow Mountain, with an altitude of 6204m, is one of the sacred mountain sites of Tibetan people. But the "lack of oxygen" caused by its super high altitude has deterred most foreign tourists and investors are also hesitant. But the appearance of "Ding Zhen, the son of Gennie", has broken people's fear of altitude sickness. People began to wonder how magnificent the peaks of Ding Zhen riding on horseback on a regular day. They began to imagine how crystal clear the spring water of "Genie's eyes". They can't help yearning for the free and simple life of Tibetans like Ding Zhen.

### 2.2. Local Culture

"White crane, please lend me your wings, don't fly to far away places, just go back to Litang." This poem full of artistic conception was written by the romantic poet Cangyang Gyatso. Legend has it that Cangyang Gyatso never visited Litang in his life because the hometown of his beloved is in Litang. Then people followed the clues of this love song to find the reincarnated soul boy of Cangyang Gyatso [1].

Therefore, the romantic poet Cangyang Gyatso has become another business card of Litang. Ding Zhen, as the interpreter of the local Cangyang Gyatso Museum, attracted many people to visit the museum to learn about the poet's life combined with poetry and legend.

The resident population in Litang is mostly Tibetan, accounting for more than 95%. Therefore, Litang is a small town with a strong Tibetan culture. Walking on the streets of the ancient town, you can see people who are passing through. They are holding prayer wheels, dressed in traditional Tibetan cultural costumes, and reverently turning scriptures. The small shops on the roadside sell butter tea and glutinous rice cakes, which are traditional Tibetan foods with extremely high calories. Because they live in cold plateaus, Tibetans live on grazing and need high-calorie food to maintain their daily needs.

A group of Tibetan children are playing around and making trouble with a pair of "plateau red" on cheeks, symbols of who have lived in the plateau area for a long time. Featuring deep-set eye sockets under the beautiful big eyes, the Tibetan girls may be walking in groups of three or five, lively chatting and laughing.

This is a utopian where there is no longer the blaring car whistle, and there are no more hurried office workers. There are only low voices, muttering chants, and occasional laughter from children.

### 2.3. Ecological Resources

Ding Zhen said in an interview that every year during the Cordyceps season, he would put on a quilt and live on the mountain for a few months, and he would dig Cordyceps every day.

Cordyceps grows in most townships in Litang County, especially on the Maoya Prairie, where Cordyceps resources are very rich, with an annual output of about 225 kg in the county. From April to July each year, farmers and herdsman prepare daily necessities and start living in the mountains for several months. [2]

Cordyceps is what we call Cordyceps sinensis. It is a complex plant medicine of insects and fungi. It has a remarkable effect when used as medicine. Cordyceps has antitussive, antiasthmatic, hemostatic, antibacterial, anti-inflammatory, sedative, antiviral, and anticonvulsant effects. It can prevent and treat acute renal failure. And it can lower blood pressure, slow heart rate, resist experimental arrhythmia, and prevent cardiovascular disease. Effect of Anti-aging, anti-oxidation can also be seen [3].

It can be used not only as a medicinal material, but as a food ingredient. So it has a wide range of needs in the market. Because it contains a variety of active substances and a variety of chemical components, it has high nutritional value. It is an precious ingredient in nutritious Chinese stews like ginseng or Astragalus membranaceus which is a perfect match for duck or chicken soup. It has the effects of replenishing qi and blood, nourishing the kidney and strengthening the spirit and improving immunity. It is a good choice for both daily health care and patients [4].

### 3. The Development of Litang after the "Ding Zhen Fever"

Previously people generally believed that Tibetans only lived in Tibet, but they ignored the Tibetan culture in western Sichuan. Now Ding Zhen is hired as a guide for the Cangyang Gyatso Miniature Museum. The Cangyang Gyatso Study Room next to the museum is filled with books donated by netizens every day. The staff laughed and said, "Every day, the courier is dismantled and the cocoon is picked up." Many netizens were about to leave for Litang in order to see where the Tibetan guy Ding Zhen works, but they were surprised to find that Litang is not in Tibet! The topic appeared on the Weibo hot search list. And Ding Zhen also posted a Weibo post: Chengdu is more than 600 kilometers from our hometown. Sichuan is very vast.

The Sichuan Cultural Tourism Bureau also began active publicity, and announced on the afternoon of November 26 that from November 15, 2020 to February 1, 2021, all scenic spots in Ganzi will be free of admission to the majority of visitors.

According to Qunar.com, as of November 25, 2020, hotel bookings in Ganzi of Sichuan province increased by 89% compared with the same period last year, and reached a peak transaction on November 17. On November 16, it increased by 15%. And in the following week, the number of hotel reservations in Ganzi doubled every week. Winter is the low season for tourism, and air travel generally shows a downward trend. However, since November 16, the number of orders to Ganzi Airport and Kangding Airport has increased by nearly 20% compared with last year [5].

And searching on the travel platform can also find that the Litang private customized tour group has also become popular. Clicking in and discovering that the package generally includes Tibetan food, Tibetan clothing experience, starry sky viewing, and Tibetan opera. Some villagers in Ding Zhen's same village have also started to set up homestay business, but there is a huge gap in the number of rooms and the indoor 24-hour oxygen supply equipment.

## 4. Reflection on "Ding Zhen Fever" and Follow-up Development

### 4.1. Experience for Rural Tourism Development

Ding Zhen has taken a different path in the era when traffic is king. With a pair of clear eyes, and a simple smile, Ding Zhen, the Tibetan teenager became Internet celebrity overnight. The fever of Ding Zhen also reflects that the fact that when overwhelmed by the fast-paced modern life, people are craving for of the truth, kindness and beauty.

The local government responded quickly and immediately cooperated with the professional filming team to launch a promotional video. At the same time, a series of tourism preferential policies in Ganzi followed. The arrival of a large number of tourists did not make Litang feel "wild and chaotic", because as early as many years ago, Litang was fully prepared for this opportunity. Ren Min, the first secretary of Xiaru Village, Litang, is a poverty alleviation worker. She discovered the business opportunity of dandelion in the village and led the villagers to sell the dandelion tea products in the village.

Not only that, the Litang government has also made a lot of attempts, holding the Kangba man beauty pageant, horse racing competition, and so on. [6] Therefore, Ding Zhen's popularity led to the development of Litang is also a kind of "incidental necessity".

CCTV News and Foreign Ministry spokesperson Hua Chunying both "liked" the Tibetan boy on the Internet. Because this Tibetan young man did not embark on a highly commercialized model such as live broadcast and delivery. Ding Zhen mentioned most often after the hot interview, "Welcome everyone to Litang, my hometown." This is why the country strongly supports Ding Zhen's popularity, behind it is the country's full concern for the people's livelihood.

### 4.2. Plans And Ideas for Follow-up Development

After Ding Zhen became popular, Litang County really went from obscurity to making a successful debut. It should be admitted that Litang's initial development stage is inseparable from the "Ding Zhen effect." However, in the Internet era, the update is extremely fast, and traffic niches are emerging one after another, and Ding Zhen will gradually be replaced by new traffic. Therefore, the most important thing at the moment is to cultivate Litang's own attractiveness.

Litang's positioning is a Tibetan cultural tourism village, and this positioning is undoubtedly certain. Compared with other tourist attractions in the country, it has its own characteristics.

First of all, from the development of cultural activities, a business card is made for the "Romantic Poet Cangyang Gyatso". The collection of Cangyang Gyatso's poems can be edited and reprinted for sale. And activities such as the recitation of Cangyang Gyatso's poetry classics are carried out to deepen the impression of this cultural brand in people's minds

As to Genei Snow Mountain, investors started the construction of a hot spring hotel at the foot of the mountain a few years ago, but there has been little improvement. More investors are willing to invest in Litang, and this situation will gradually improve. At the same time, other tourism projects in Genie Snow Mountain should be built as soon as possible to form a cluster area of "hot spring town".

Secondly, the focus of Litang tourism is Tibetan culture which is characterized by Tibetan homestays and experience of Tibetan culture. The most urgent task is to standardize Tibetan homestays, improve the oxygen supply equipment in the homestays, and protect the health and safety of foreign tourists. This is the prerequisite. Then it is to create unique folk custom experience activities and abandon the cookie-cutter tourism model. Events of making tsampa and butter tea by hand, local dance, and horse racing are all unique and grounded activities for visitors to join in the lives of local people.

Finally, the engine for economic development of Litang should not be limited to pure tourism. The creation of characteristic tourism products is a very important method to win tourists' heart. The "cordyceps" mentioned by Ding Zhen is one of the local specialty. In addition, Litang Cordyceps with high yield and quality is a local produce worthy of further development. It is recommended to use high-quality cordyceps as raw materials to produce cordyceps related food and beverage, such as Cordyceps wine with a local brand. At the same time, the medicinal value of Cordyceps should be utilized to promote Tibetan medicine culture. A professional team must be hired to ensure the production of high-quality rather than low-cost products. Or else, Litang would gradually lose the reputation among tourists if the influence of Ding Zhen faded away. The local government should strive to develop the four-in-one tourism service with Cangyang Gyatso, the hot Spring Town of Genie Snow Mountain, Tibetan Folk Custom Tour and Cordyceps Food Souvenirs for Litang County, highlighting local characteristics, focusing on quality assurance, and making competitive Tourism in Tibetan areas.

## 5. Conclusion

In fact, Ding Zhen's appearance was just a window. He opened up people's attention behind him and gained traffic for Ding Zhen's hometown, Litang County of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The revitalization of this small county that has just been lifted out of poverty has greatly improved its popularity and economy. This is a very good effect. We should encourage more people like Ding Zhen to appear, use the influence of Internet celebrity to help more villages similar to Litang County, and effectively improve the local economic conditions and people's lives.

Ding Zhen, the change from an ordinary "rattle boy" to today's "Litang Image Ambassador" not only reflects Ding Zhen's personal development. What's more, Litang County has the opportunity to move from the poverty stricken mountains to the sight of millions of people. For Litang, this is a magnificent transformation.

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