

Research Articles

Consuming the Pastoral Desire

Li Ziqi, Food Vlogging, and the Structure of Feeling in the Era of Microcelebrity

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Abstract

This article studies how the new cultural form of food vlogging intervenes the perennial debate on tradition and modernity by focusing on the case of Li Ziqi, whose cinematic videos celebrating bucolic life won her popularity in China and overseas. A study of the production and reception of Li's videos not only shows urbanites' nostalgia for a pastoral way of life but also reveals the role played by the more structural forces—that is, the market and the state—in appropriating and managing the desire for and consumption of the pastoral for the construction of modern identities—both individually as a consumer and collectively as a nation. The market forces, including the ideology of consumerism, its attendant aesthetics, and the entire regime of social media marketing, were present throughout Li's celebrification. Meanwhile, the state became involved after Li's rise to fame, when it became aware of her value for domestic and international publicity. If the market promotes a narrative that caters to the “aesthetical turn” in everyday life in a consumer society, the state's validation and appropriation of Li points to a cultural nationalism that departs from political nationalism and is more commensurate with consumerism. However, the Chinese state also tries to transcend the market discourse, whose egalitarian form conceals substantive inequality by positioning itself as an integrative force that bridges the urban-rural gap. By making Li Ziqi a social media phenomenon, the market uses the rural as a resource to meet the urban desire for authenticity while the Chinese state reappropriates the icon of

marketized media in its “rural rejuvenation” design to help the disadvantaged rural other regain its agency.

Keywords: Li Ziqi, vlogging, urban-rural relations, structure of feeling, microcelebrity, consumerism, cultural nationalism, tradition and modernity, food media

Raymond Williams uses the term “structure of feeling” to capture the coexistence of permanent human desires and the historicity of the social form in the evolution of the country and the city. “In country and city, physically present and substantial, the experience finds material which gives body to the thoughts.”¹ Our experiences with the country and the city as two ways of settlement are associated with two fundamental human needs and aspirations: “the idea of pastoral innocence” versus “civilizing agency”² or the need for quiet contemplation as well as the desire for action and progress.

While the transition from traditional to modern society saw “a victory of town over country”³ and reduced the latter to a role of providing material subsistence for the former, urban life, with its emphasis on standardization and the separation of production from consumption, breeds alienation. As it is, in popular imagination, city life has come to be associated with “artifice, dissonance and superficiality,” whereas rural life, which connotes “purity, simplicity and rootedness,” symbolizes authenticity.⁴ To ameliorate the lack, it is believed that in modern life, authenticity can be crafted from appearances rather than essence and secured through the practice of consumption.⁵ Mass media play an important role in constructing identity through both offering symbolic consumption and facilitating material consumption.

1. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985), 291.

2. Williams, *The Country and the City*, 290.

3. Williams, 30.

4. Helene Shugart, “Sumptuous Texts: Consuming ‘Otherness’ in the Food Film Genre,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 25, no.1 (2008): 68–90, 73.

5. Shugart, “Sumptuous Texts.”

In media representations, rural life is often portrayed as the “authentic other” to nourish the artificiality of city life.

Meanwhile, with an egalitarian ideology that valorizes the everyday experience of the average person, the social media era lends new cultural forms to the expression of these permanently conflicting human feelings and desires. Vlogging, for instance, empowers the grassroots rural population so that they need no longer be represented by professional media but can give voice to their own needs and represent their own lives. This gives rise to a microcelebrity phenomenon such as Li Ziqi, a Chinese vlogger whose cinematic videos celebrating bucolic life won her popularity in China and overseas.

Li started filming her life in her rural hometown in southwestern China’s Sichuan province in 2015 and gradually built her social media presence. By 2019 she had become a household name. Today she has a huge following on every major social media platform based in China, such as the leading microblogging site of Weibo (27.57 million followers) and Bilibili, a popular video-sharing site (7.92 million followers). Her videos show her preparing exquisite meals using garden-fresh ingredients and traditional techniques. The picture-perfect rural scenery in Sichuan’s mountainous areas, the organic food, and the peaceful pastoral life she shares with her grandmother are all key elements of her appeal, particularly for urban dwellers, who constitute the majority of Internet users in China today.⁶ This seems to suggest “an unbreakable tie to the soil” for the Chinese,⁷ who are descendants of an agrarian civilization of thousands of years, despite the country’s recent embrace of modernization and global capitalism. But Li’s fame extends beyond China. She also commands the largest number of followers for a Chinese-language channel on YouTube (16.4 million followers). This makes

6. According to the *48th Statistical Report on China’s Internet Development* conducted by CNNIC (August 2021), urban Internet users constitute 70.6 percent of the total number of Internet users.

7. Fei Xiaotong, *Xiangtu Zhongguo (From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society)* (Shanghai: Shanghai People’s Press, 1948 [2006]).

her success especially appealing to the Chinese government, which is eager to promote the nation's soft power, both domestically and overseas.

By studying the rise of Li Ziqi, this paper adds to the perennial debate over tradition and modernity in contemporary China. How does the new media form of food vlogging construct Li's double roles as a farmer and a microcelebrity and maintain her authenticity? What is the uniqueness of Li that led to her popularity? Situating the Li phenomenon in the larger political-economic context, what are the roles of the market and the state in her celebrification? Finally, how does food vlogging represent or negotiate the power relations between the country and the city for a society going through rapid modernization such as China? These are the questions that this paper tries to answer. For an analysis of the narrative strategies adopted by Li Ziqi, I immersed myself in viewing Li's content on her Bilibili and YouTube channels before zeroing on one particular episode ("The Life of Wheat") for a closer analysis. I also gathered the top twenty comments under each of the top ten most-watched videos from Li Ziqi's Bilibili and YouTube channels to gain an idea on how domestic and overseas viewers react to her content. Finally, I drew extensively from the media coverage on Li along her road to fame and on the rural rejuvenation plan proposed by the Chinese government to explore the links between the Li Ziqi phenomenon and the influence from larger structural forces, including the market and the state.

Li Ziqi's Story

Li Ziqi grew up in a village near the city of Mianyang in the Sichuan province. She had a miserable childhood. Her parents divorced when she was very young. Her father then passed away and her stepmother mistreated her. Her grandparents brought her under their roof and raised her.⁸ Due to

8. According to an interview by Goldthread, a column of the *South China Morning Post*, September 17, 2019.

the struggling family circumstances, she quit school at the age of fourteen and went to the city looking for a job. For a while she worked as a DJ in a bar. When she learned that her grandmother fell ill in 2012, she decided to return to her hometown to care for the elderly. She started filming short videos to promote her e-shop selling food and snacks in 2015. While her sales tanked, her short videos gradually drew attention from the online public.

At first, Li's videos averaged around five minutes and featured only food preparation or handicraft making. In 2017, Li began to partner with Hangzhou-based Weinian Technology Inc., an MCN (multichannel network) that specializes in the celebrification of up-and-coming social media influencers.⁹ The style of her videos received a discernible facelift in the following year.

By 2018, Li's average video length doubled as the production quality improved in storytelling, cinematography, and editing. She extended the scope of her lens to cover the entire life cycle of food production. In her videos, she grows and harvests staples and vegetables or gathers wild food ingredients from her beautiful natural surroundings before she demonstrates her exquisite cooking skills. In addition to the enriched rural theme, her stories began to center on family relationships, foregrounding her role as a filial granddaughter. Li gradually established herself as an iconic vlogger representing an idyllic pastoral life.

However, the rise of Li has not been universally acclaimed, particularly within China. It has been accompanied by controversy ranging from criticism that she beautifies the country to reservations if her content contributes to China's soft power because it represents a "backward China," and from early suspicion that her content production involved media professionals¹⁰ to skepticism that commodification compromised her authenticity.

9. Liu Qian, "Li Ziqi baohong beihou de nabizhang" (The balance sheet behind the rise to fame of Li Ziqi), *The Paper*, January 19, 2019, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_5561288.

10. Li Ziqi acknowledged in 2017 that she now had support from a small team consisting of a cinematographer and an assistant.

The Li Ziqi phenomenon provides us with an excellent opportunity to observe how the market, the state, social media technology, and public opinion interact with each other in crafting, debating, and appropriating the popularity of a celebrity vlogger and how the new media form of food vlogging may negotiate urban-rural relations in China.

Mediated Food through the Lens of Consumerism and Cultural Nationalism

Occupying the opposite ends of the material spectrum, food and media technologies form an interesting comparison in their relationship to the country and the city. As both nature's bounty and the product of human labor through agriculture, food is the fundamental material source that sustains human life. As such, it is intimately associated with rural life, given its rootedness in land, and with city life, which it nourishes. Food's unique position on the interstice between the country and the city makes it an ideal fetish that mediates urban-rural relations. Embodying the paradoxical nature of all rituals, food simultaneously "defines inclusion and encourages solidarity"¹¹ and effectively maintains and patrols social boundaries. Indeed, food articulates power relations in the starkest terms, "demarcating those who eat from those who are eaten (or provide food)."¹² If the transformation of nature via land cultivation and cooking makes food a potent signifier "that marks the distinction between nature and culture,"¹³ then in modern life, it is the side that represents "culture," or urban civilization, that takes precedence over "nature," which represents the country.

11. Judith Goode, "Food," in *Folklore, Cultural Performance, and Popular Entertainments: A Communications-Centred Handbook*, ed. R. Baumann (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 233–45, 234.

12. Mervyn Nicholson, "My Dinner with Stanley: Kubrick, Food, and the Logic of Images," *Literature Film Quarterly* 29 (2001): 279–90, 280.

13. Shugart, "Sumptuous," 69.

Meanwhile, mass media, as material instruments for symbolic production and dissemination on a massive scale, mark the epitome of technological development, which is humanity's intervention in nature that has thrived under urban civilization. Mass media fulfil individual needs for impersonal sources of information in a society that is no longer bound by small kinship-based communities but by instrumentality and division of labor. At the same time, mass media help cultivate identities and foster a sense of solidarity through creating an "imagined community."¹⁴

Given food and media's complex connection to the country, the city, and the notion of authenticity, when food becomes a media theme, it is an especially interesting window for studying urban-rural relations of a society. According to Laura Lindenfeld, "Food and media condition the consumption of each other and thus form a locus of struggle and contestation where various kinds of cultural work gets done."¹⁵ Such cultural and ideological work is further embedded in the social, political, and economic arrangements that inform the media system of a society.

Since commercialization is the underlying logic that defines media in most parts of the world today, food media's intervention in cultural politics is inevitably bound up with the role played by the market. To date, food media genres are predominantly consumption oriented and implicitly urban centered—that is, they favor commercialized media aesthetics in which the authenticity of identity is achieved through consumption. Among them, different genres target specifically classed consumers. For instance, food films within the international art house genre cater to the upper-middle class's pursuit of cultural capital by "cultivating a 'popular connoisseurship' in matters of taste" while advertisements of ethnic-themed restaurants

14. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (New York: Verso, 2006).

15. Laura Lindenfeld, "Feasts for Our Eyes: Viewing Films on Food through New Lenses," in *Food as Communication: Communication as Food*, eds. Janet M. Cramer, Carlita P. Greene, and Lynn M. Walters (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 3–21, 5.

appeal to middle-class sensibilities by emphasizing close kinship ties.¹⁶ In these media productions, a universal consumerist discourse belies distinctions underlying market segmentation strategies—that is, they validate the tastes of dominant groups within identity communities. Implicitly, the rural is offered up as an object of desire to ameliorate the artificiality of urban life but to eventually reaffirm its superiority.¹⁷

Meanwhile, food media also intersects with the influence of the state. The turn toward “banal nationalism”¹⁸ makes food, a mundane object, a fitting symbol in studying the representation of nations. Since food falls within the realm of everyday consumption, in enlisting food as a theme in nation branding, a state usually gives a dominant role to the private sector, such as the “Global Thai” and “Cool Japan” campaigns launched by their respective governments to promote the countries’ cuisines and cultural industries.¹⁹ But consumption need not be the only prism through which food is appropriated in cultural nationalism. In the case of China, despite the country’s recent embrace of market economy, which makes consumerism a salient public discourse, given its agrarian history and the Communist Party’s roots in the country, paying tribute to the *production* side of rural life may figure more prominently into the party-state’s publicity efforts domestically and overseas.

Yang’s study of the popular food-themed documentary series *A Bite of China* presents a case of state-market coproduction of cultural nationalism through a nuanced presentation of the production and consumption of Chinese food. As a product of a marketized state-media system

16. Diane Negra, “Ethnic Food Fetishism, Whiteness, and Nostalgia in Recent Film and Television,” *Velvet Light Trap* 50 (2002): 62–76, 62.

17. Zhang Heyang, “Shisu tiyan lei man zongyi jiemu ‘xiangtu xing’ de shendu jiexi” (An analysis of the “the rural” in the food-themed slow entertainment reality show), *Sichuan Drama* 8 (2020): 127–29; Zeng Yiguo and Shi Jing, “cong ‘qinggan anmo’ dao ‘qinggan jiegou’: xiandaixing jiaolv xia de tianyuan xiangxiang” (From “emotional massage” to “structure of feeling”: Li Ziqi and pastoral imagination under modern anxiety), *Journal of Fujian Normal University* 221 (2020): 122–30.

18. Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (New York: Sage, 1995).

19. Atsuko Ichijo and Ronald Ranta, *Food, National Identity and Nationalism from Everyday to Global Politics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

(i.e., China Central Television),²⁰ the documentary's aesthetics resemble those of nature documentaries by Western channels, such as the BBC and National Geographic.²¹ It flattens the complex political and economic struggles to foreground protagonists that are bound by kinship ties and focuses on the “geographical, historical and cultural dimensions of what Chinese people eat.”²² At the same time, Yang took note of the series' departure from usual food television's promotion of consumption to emphasize on food production. In these portrayals, the TV producers were careful to balance the requirements of a commercialized media form that turns labor into a spectacle and the socialist realist filmmaking tradition that valorizes the laboring people.

With the penetration of market influence, the documentary seems to bear no trace of the state. But the state made its voice heard after the series' success, when senior cultural officials hailed it as an exemplar of original content with success in the international audio-visual market and hence a contributor to China's soft power. Here, the state morphed from its former role as a mobilizer of politicized culture to a cheerleader in a commercialized cultural field.

Interestingly, the key elements of *A Bite of China's* success, including the emulation of a globally dominant form of visual storytelling, the focus on food production, and the state's appropriation of the market success of a cultural product, are all replicated in the Li Ziqi phenomenon—except this time the cultural icon celebrated is a product of the social media field. Social media, which democratize access to means of symbolic production and dissemination, seem to confer greater agency on rural population in giving voice to their own aspirations, with the potential to alter the power dynamics

20. Yang Fan, “A Bite of China: Food, Media, and the Televisual Negotiation of National Difference,” *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 32, no. 5 (2015): 409–25, 414.

21. Martin Roberts, “‘Baraka’: World Cinema and the Global Culture Industry,” *Cinema Journal* 37, no. 3 (1988): 62–82.

22. Bai Shi, “Tasting China,” *Beijing Review*, June 14, 2012, http://www.bjreview.com/quotes/txt/2012-06/15/content_459808.htm.

in urban-rural interactions. But this statement needs qualification. Despite its egalitarian ethos, the social media field still largely operates according to the principles of the market and attention economy, which prioritize consumption as a means of acquiring identity. In Li Ziqi's case, the market forces, including the ideology of consumerism, its attendant aesthetics, and the entire regime of social media marketing, are integral to her celebrification. But at the same time, her vlog also showcases the previously obscure scenes of rural labor. This tension is embodied in Li Ziqi's double roles. As a farmer, she is anchored in the land, and what defines her are farming and food preparation techniques, which she referred to as her survival skills in an interview.²³ However, as a celebrity vlogger, her identity is closely associated with commercial culture, which looks for the presentation of an idealized version of pastoral life. Her embeddedness in land, which anchors her and gives her authenticity, and her media persona, which deterritorializes and yet reterritorializes her for the social media age, make her a boundary spanner. Meanwhile, because Li's success was incubated within the market, it was not until after she acquired stardom that the state became aware of her iconic value for domestic and international publicity. The state's validation and appropriation of Li points to a strand of "cultural nationalism" that departs from earlier political nationalism and is more commensurate with consumerism. However, because the Chinese state also espouses socialism, it tries to transcend the market discourse, whose egalitarian form conceals substantive inequality, by reappropriating the icon of the vlogging world to tackle urban-rural inequality. Indeed, setting Li Ziqi up as a role model for farmers is reminiscent of the Communist-era propaganda practice of creating an archetype from the masses in service of the socialist cause. This time, the role model still arises from the rural grassroots, but the selection mechanism is the market.

23. Interview by Goldthread, a column of *South China Morning Post*, September 17, 2019.

Consumerism and the Market's Role in Managing Pastoral Desire

Visualizing Farm Production as the “New Face” of Consumerism

A compelling story usually requires ingredients such as “moral agonism” and “twisting and turning in plots.”²⁴ However, Li Ziqi’s story does not thrive on human conflicts. Instead, it captures the traditional Chinese cultural ideal of “the unity of heaven and man.” The setting is a picturesque village tucked away in the mountains with no discernable geographical or linguistic markers, except for the few scenes when she converses with her grandma in Sichuan dialect. Her storyline is organized around the temporal rhythm of crop growth, which is cyclical in nature. It also portrays idealized social relations. Apart from Li Ziqi, recurring figures include her grandmother and her assistant, the latter of whom is like a younger sister. Once or twice her cousins visit her for a family dinner. Occasionally, villagers would help her with farm work or provide her with food sources, such as livestock, that she does not raise at home. The transactions are conducted through bartering, invoking the most basic form of exchange untainted by commercialization.

Take an episode from her staples series, “The Life of Wheat,” as an example. In the nineteen-minute video, the first seven minutes are devoted to the cultivation of wheat. While the growth cycle is long and involves strenuous work, under Li’s lens, farming life acquires a poetic language. The cultivation process is distilled into key moments surrounding particular solar terms. It starts with Li planting the wheat seeds on a windy autumn day, moving swiftly through the sprouting of green shoots around “Light Snow (小雪),” with the use of time-lapse devices and extreme close-up shots, to

24. Jeffrey Alexander, “Cultural Pragmatics: Social Performance between Ritual and Strategy,” *Sociological Theory* 22, no. 4 (2004): 528–73.

a scene of the maturing wheat field near the “Spring Equinox (春分)” the next year, with lush green plump ears of wheat glowing in the sun.

The highlights in the segment on wheat production feature the harvesting season at “the Beginning of Summer (立夏),” which foregrounds intense yet fulfilling labor. The ripened wheat field looked like undulating amber waves under the morning sun as Li and the aunties in the village who joined her in the harvest frantically waved their sickles, leaving a neat swath behind them (see figures 1 and 2).

Part of the sequence is in fast motion to enhance viewer sensation. This is juxtaposed with scenes of Li and aunties singing, dancing, and laughing aloud in the field. After a day’s backbreaking work, Li treated the aunties with wine and a bountiful feast made of fresh produce from her farm. The close neighborly ties are conveyed when Li parted with the aunties: “Call me if you need my help in the field.” The harvesting segment is followed by scenes of reaping, threshing, and winnowing in Li’s backyard. Premodern tools are chosen for these procedures instead of a combine, to underscore that traditional farming techniques are preserved (see figures 3 and 4).

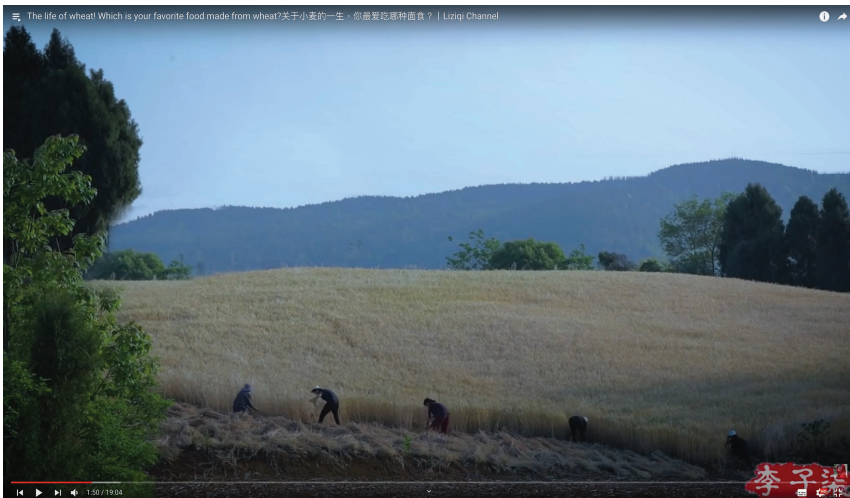


Figure 1: Pan shot of the wheat field. *Source:* “The Life of Wheat,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo>.



Figure 2: Harvesting in the wheat field. *Source:* “The Life of Wheat,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo>.



Figure 3: Traditional way of threshing. *Source:* “The Life of Wheat,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo>.



Figure 4: Winnowing in the sun. *Source:* “The Life of Wheat,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo>.

The rest of the episode moved from food production to preparation, in which Li demonstrated her genius as a jack-of-all-trades in turning every part of wheat into something delicious or useful. She wove wheat stalk into straw hats, made malt paintings from germinated grains, used the remaining grains to feed poultry or nourish plants, and turned freshly grounded flour into a feast of delicacies, including fried dough twist, cold rice noodles, steamed meat bun, roasted gluten, and so on. The segment adopted the form of TV cooking programs, with midrange or close-up shots to showcase the freshness of the food ingredients as well as the dexterity of her culinary skills. The camerawork was meticulous. Some viewers even likened her kitchen shots to famous paintings such as Vermeer’s “Milkmaid” (see figure 5).

Viewers also resonate with the interaction between Ziqi and her grandmother, such as a scene in which her granny was asked to spin a wheel to choose a pattern for the malt painting: “The grandmother’s laugh at the drawing spin was the sweetest!” (see figures 6 and 7).



Figure 5: Making *Liangpi*. Source: “The Life of Wheat,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo>



Figure 6: Granny and maltose painting. Source: “The Life of Wheat,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo>.



Figure 7: Enjoying the feast. Source: “The Life of Wheat,” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo>.

The incorporation of food-production scenes into consumption is what distinguishes Li Ziqi from most consumption-oriented food vloggers. These scenes convey the toil and joy of farmers when cultivating, harvesting, processing, and enjoying the fruits of their labor. But despite a conscientious effort to foreground the labor motif, her videos idealize pastoral life while papering over any actual social, economic, or political struggles going on in the village. Faithful to the life of a farmer, her videos emphasize the essential farming techniques. But at the same time, Li is playing the role of an archetypal farmer. The script selects and organizes certain elements of village life for presentation and turns the ordinary into the extraordinary. In celebrating the pastoral idyll, a life of abundance, and the harmony among villagers and between villagers and nature, it fails to mention, for instance, that the village remains poor in the region.²⁵ It also omits the interim stage

25. The original report by the *Times Weekly* revealing this fact has since been deleted. “寻找李子柒家的48小时” (48 hours to Find Li Ziqi’s house), *China Digital Times*, December 22, 2019, <https://chinadigitaltimes.net/chinese/630843.html>.

of industrialized food processing and distribution, which is an integral part of the commodity supply chain that underlies the actual encounter with food for most Chinese today.

According to Helene Shugart, “In a consumer landscape increasingly characterized by artifice, replication, transience, and superficiality, the quest for novelty and uniqueness is endowed with greater market value.”²⁶ The emerging interest in incorporating scenes of farm labor into food media is but the latest expression of such a quest—hence the rise of the “slow entertainment” movement, which has spun new reality shows planned around activities of rural life, such as Hunan Satellite Television’s popular *Back to the Field* series. In these shows, scripts underplay elements of competition or drama that characterize earlier reality genres. Instead, they feature celebrities in their reconstructed roles retiring to a bucolic setting and engaging in everyday activities such as harvesting and food preparation. Li Ziqi’s video style echoes this trend. These efforts can be read within the context of the “aestheticization of everyday life,”²⁷ a movement of the consumer society that fetishizes mundane objects and experiences previously out of the purview of aesthetic contemplation, to facilitate the quest for identity. In Li Ziqi’s videos, country-grown and homemade food as well as handmade furniture and artefacts are fetishized to represent a mode of life underlining tradition, closeness to nature, and familial ties.

By turning both food production and preparation into a media spectacle, authentic labor becomes a media commodity capable of generating profits in terms of both social media user subscriptions (here, Li’s videos are seen as a form of cultural content) and advertisements by platform sponsors (here, the audience attention garnered by Li’s videos becomes another form of commodity). Further, Li’s videos are a direct form of advertising for her brand merchandise, which is her primary source of revenue. The mass production of her brand items, such as lotus powder and snail rice noodles, is

26. Shugart, “Sumptuous,” 73.

27. Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (New York: Sage, 2007).

outsourced to other manufacturers, except that they are sold at much higher prices than lesser-known brands. When Li's e-store selling food and handicrafts opened on T-Mall, China's largest e-commerce platform, in 2018, her sales exceeded 10 million RMB yuan within just three days. During the "Double 11" ("November 11") Shopping Festival of 2019, her sales topped 80 million yuan.²⁸ Ultimately, Li's videos are reincorporated back into a system of capitalist production, accumulation, and consumption. One might argue that the invisible scenes of assembly-line workers toiling away in food factories producing the Li Ziqi brand items are the true faces of "laboring people" in today's society. Omitting them while foregrounding Li's performance is perhaps the real irony underlining the popularity of these video series.

Mobility via Social Media Facilitates Retrenchment of Identity

In food films, authenticity always entails simplicity and wholeness and is associated with land made distant by time or space.²⁹ Similarly, Li Ziqi's story takes place in a village removed from big-city influences and portrays a life dependent on farm labor or simply on nature's bounties. Her persona has a sense of mysteriousness. To date, the whereabouts of her country abode remains unknown. Once a Guangzhou-based newspaper published an article in which a reporter embarked on a trail discovering the exact location of Li's hometown. However, as of this paper's writing, the original article and its reprints have all but disappeared from Chinese websites.³⁰

In addition, Li's life is isolated from those of her fans. Unlike most social media influencers who have to constantly update their accounts to retain

28. Sun Pengfei, "Li Ziqi buzhi shi xiannv, haishi fupo" (Li Ziqi is not only a fairy, but also a rich woman), *IT Times*, January 10, 2020.

29. Shugart, "Sumptuous," 83.

30. "寻找李子柒家的48小时" (48 hours to Find Li Ziqi's house). It is unclear who engineered the deletion.

web traffic, Li has few videos (128 in total on YouTube) and updates infrequently, partly as a result of the long production cycle involved in making one episode. While other vloggers frequently interact with their followers, Li Ziqi rarely directly communicates with her fans and seldom gives interviews. She is known as one of China's most mysterious microcelebrities.

Therefore, even as mobility and interactivity characterize the era of social media, Li Ziqi's identity as a microcelebrity speaks more to a retrenchment rooted in the local. Her identity is better described as a returnee to the countryside. A similar pattern can be found in the protagonists of major food films, such as *Like Water for Chocolate* and *Woman on Top*, who are rural ethnic females possessed with extraordinary culinary acumen. Their vicissitudes send them away for a sojourn in big cities, where their culinary skills become recognized and earn them worldly success. However, they eventually return to their rural homes, which anchor their identity, but with greater power vis-à-vis the country folks. In Li Ziqi's case, social media, which promotes her farming and culinary expertise, serves as the medium of mobility and confers power on her. But such power should be better conceived as offering her identity up as a resource that gratifies the urbanites' fantasy for a rural world of simplicity and purity.

This said, Li's experience in the city is indispensable to her eventual rise as a famous vlogger. Those years away from home arguably acquainted her with the taste of urbanites. (While working as a DJ in a bar, she was in a position to observe the leisurely urban lifestyle up close.) In the city, she initially remained obscure as one among millions of migrant workers. But after internalizing urban middle-class taste by tapping into her rural identity through vlogging, she started to make a name for herself. Still, her popularity did not soar until after her partnership with a well-known MCN—a new kind of intermediary born in the social media age and the city.³¹ It was with the sup-

31. Ramon Lobato, "The Cultural Logic of Digital Intermediaries: YouTube Multichannel Networks," *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 22, no. 4 (2016): 348–60.

port of the MCN's marketing strategies, data analytics capacity, and capital that she transformed from an obscure vlogger to a social media influencer with a unique angle in depicting rural life. As her success suggests, her value to the market does not lie in her actual role as a farmer but in her symbolic role as an archetypal farmer who portrays an idealized rural life removed of rough edges. In the contemporary "structure of feeling," if conceptualizing Li's social media performance as conveying the "feeling" of the era (e.g., pastoral desire), it is the complex marketing forces enabling the production and dissemination of this performance that constitute the "structure."

If Li's retrenchment of identity facilitated by the mobility of social media gave her success, the same technology, when combined with the *actual* physical mobility of rural workers, produces a different type of subculture: *Tuwei* (土味) videos, which originate from small town/rural youth who migrated to larger cities looking for employment and who are active on short video mobile apps, such as Kuaishou.³² While the character "tu (土)" means being "rural," the videos may have no immediate connection to rural life. Instead, it is more like a condescending title that urbanites confer on the "unrefined" group of youth who aspire to city fashion but are without the social and economic means of doing so. Unlike Li Ziqi whose identity is tied to the land, the identity of Tuwei vloggers seems to be in a state of betwixt and between. The videos become a way to vent their frustration at the lack of recognition by parodying urban fashion through dressing codes, such as Korean-style outfits, leggings, and gommino loafers as well as tacky performances with exaggerated body movements and easy-to-remember rhyming memes. If "fairy" Li Ziqi is associated with the traditional rural virtues of diligence and temperance, some Tuwei vloggers are shown in the archetype of a glutton, with a carnival-like style that intentionally tramples all standards that middle-class taste deems appropriate. Moving in the opposite

32. Liu Tao, "Duan shipin, xiangcun kongjian shengchan yu jiannan de jiecheng liudong" (Short videos, rural spatial production and low class mobility), *Education and Communication Research* 17 (2018): 13–16.

direction of “the aestheticization of everyday life,” they appeal to the voyeuristic pleasure for the illicit, and are thus temporarily exempt from the middle-class moral regime of self-discipline.

Cultural Nationalism and the State’s Role in Co-opting Pastoral Desire for Solidarity-Building

Making sense of Li Ziqi: Idealism versus Realism

The elevation of Li Ziqi to a cultural phenomenon has a lot to do with her huge success on YouTube, which seems more total than her domestic appeal. Each of the ten most-watched videos on her YouTube channel accumulates views ranging from 18.72 to 55.08 million, and some attract comments well over fifty thousand. To have an idea of how overseas viewer reaction may differ from those of domestic viewers, I gathered the top twenty comments under each of the top ten most-watched videos from Li Ziqi’s Bilibili channel and YouTube channel. While both samples seem overwhelmingly positive upon first reading, they show interesting differences when I start to look for references to any existing controversy concerning Li Ziqi. In other words, a comment may be coded as positive but is written in a way that explicitly defends Li against her critics. While only 4 percent of the comments from the YouTube sample refer to any kind of controversy over authenticity, about 28 percent of the comments in the Bilibili sample point to the existence of a wider debate.

The YouTube comments focus more on the immediate textual meanings offered by Li’s videos than on interrogating the structural factors that inform her video production. A majority of comments converge on praising Li’s versatility, especially her culinary skills, and treating the videos as a DIY manual (e.g., “Liziqi channel is like an entertaining documentary + plant life lessons + farming lessons + heritage lessons + lifestyle tips all in a way that will make you love learning and working”; “As a Chef myself for the

last 40 years, she's my IRON CHEF. Her selection and presentation are amazingly simple yet elegant. Certainly, if she were to have cooking classes or books, they would definitely be top notch"; and "I have insurmountable respect and admiration for this woman . . . the fact that she's bringing back to life an archaic way of doing things. Because of her I've learned a lot about culture . . . and gained several new skills."). Many are equally fascinated by the natural scenery presented ("If I die and go to heaven, this is what I want my heaven to look like"). For one thing, Li's village scenes lack a specific geographical marker. In fact, only 3 percent of the YouTube comments in the sample mention the words "China" or "Chinese." It is possible that the YouTube viewers are more drawn to the aesthetic value presented by Li's videos as a form of leisurely consumption than are concerned with the social economic reality confronting her as an actual farmer.

On the other hand, if we probe into the comments in the Bilibili sample that indicate controversy over Li's authenticity, coupled with a brief survey of the coverage of Li Ziqi during her rise to fame by the Chinese language press, we find that in 2017 there was a heated debate over whether Li's content was faithful to rural reality and whether she was true to her "one-woman-show" brand or had enlisted professional support. In 2018, upon the opening of Li's e-shop on T-Mall, the controversy shifted to whether commercialization compromised her authenticity. Finally, at the end of 2019, the debate was over whether her videos constituted a successful form of Chinese cultural export.

For sure, Li's portrayal of an idealized country still appeals to millions of Chinese, especially those who try to escape the stress of modern metropolitan life. It may even be said that those who resonate with her vlogging the most, and who find her videos invoking a strong feeling of nostalgia, are rural emigrants to the city. In fact, this viewer niche authors some of the most emotion-fraught comments on Li's vlogging channel. To them, it is enough that the videos bear narrative fidelity to the countryside of their childhood memories. However, to others, a mere appreciation of the cultural truth conveyed by Li's videos in the form of an idealized pastoral life seems

inadequate. For one thing, Chinese viewers have ready access to alternative discourses on rural China that compete with Li's representation. Among others, there are the "carnavalesque rural China" invoked through the Tuwei subculture, the "decaying rural China" illustrated by realist-themed films and literary works, which underline deeper social problems such as population exodus and a struggling rural economy, and state-run China Central Television Chanel 17 (CCTV-17) devoted to agricultural programming, which seeks to portray the country realistically but with an upbeat tone. When these diverse discourses vie for public attention, it is more difficult for one version to triumph as the most authentic image of rural China.

As such, Chinese social media users are more likely to be concerned about the immediate social environment and the structural conditions that inform Li Ziqi's video production and her rise to fame. When viewers with firsthand rural knowledge contend that Li's beautification of the country glosses over the struggles of farmers in their daily lives, or when they challenge that the use of professional media expertise or outright commercialization contaminates Li's authenticity as a vlogger, they are not only concerned about the fidelity of Li's performance with a quintessential Chinese cultural script but are interrogating the "empirical credibility" and "experiential commensurability"³³ of Li's vlogging with actual reality. Throughout these debates, urban-rural tension is never far from the surface.

The State Recruits Li Ziqi as a Role Model to Bridge the Urban-Rural Divide

When the market fails to adequately address the urban-rural conflict in Chinese reality, the state can make a difference. A December 2019 debate on social media over whether Li Ziqi constituted a positive form of Chinese

33. David Snow and Robert Benford, "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization," *International Social Movement Research* 1 (1988): 197–217.

cultural export led to the state's involvement in the Li phenomenon. A major criticism against Li in the debate was that, since she showcased the “backwardness” of rural China, her vlogging should not qualify as an exemplar of Chinese culture.

Key social media influencers soon came to Li's defense. An article by Internet opinion leader Lei Siling that first appeared on WeChat on December 5 and gained millions of views and pulled in 63,000 comments overnight summarized well the views in support of Li.³⁴ According to the article, those who dismissed Li's videos as backward had misguided faith in modernity, one that viewed anything associated with “the rural” as inferior to the “urban.” However, much wisdom in Chinese culture is preserved in its rural way of life: “Through recording and presenting her life to make a living, Li inadvertently diffuses Chinese ancient wisdom and culture to inspire a world audience.”³⁵

The state media were also quick to endorse. It was the first time a microcelebrity broke into the official discourse on soft power. China Central Television and the Communist Party organ People's Daily both lavished Li with praise, believing that her popularity in the West would make the nation more appealing. The CCTV commentary goes, “Without a word praising China, Li tells a good China story.”³⁶ An editorial from *China Daily*, China's state English-language newspaper, summed it up: “Technically, the fine quality of her cinematographic output is eye-catching. . . . Culturally, what touches the heart of Li's followers is the universal language of love, inner peace, caring for the family and love for nature”³⁷.

34. Lei Siling, “Li Ziqi zenme jiu bushi wenhua shuchu le” (Why not consider Li Ziqi as a form of “cultural export?”), *Wei ni xie yige gushi* (*Writing a Story for You*), December 5, 2019, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/NWEEIW2ntGbjUpKUJmHf3Q>.

35. Lei, “Li Ziqi.”

36. “Wo ye man zihao, yinwei wo jiushi Li Ziqi zuoping beijing lide yige dian” (I am very proud, since I am also one dot in the background of Li Ziqi's video), CCTV News, December 10, 2019, <https://weibo.com/ttarticle/p/show?id=2309404447882362093714>.

37. Xu Xiaohong, “A Very Good Way to Tell China's Story to the World,” *China Daily* (Hong Kong Edition), December 21, 2019.

This online debate pertains to the larger theoretical question on tradition versus modernity in China and the official stance on it. Here, the state's subsequent involvement in the Li Ziqi phenomenon bespeaks a kind of "cultural nationalism" that is, to some extent, commensurate with, but also transcends, the consumerist discourse promoted by market modernity. In doing so, the state draws on alternative ideological resources, including both Confucianism and Chinese communism.

Confucianism was the dominant ruling ideology throughout China's agrarian history. While Confucius as an intellectual had a rather condescending attitude toward farming, Confucianism as a school of thought enjoined the feudal state to attach great importance to agriculture. Historically it was a common practice for Chinese officials at various levels, even the emperor, to engage in "quan nong (劝农)" activities (i.e., activities to promote agriculture), such as the ritual of "gong geng" (i.e., 躬耕, tilling by oneself to set an example for farmers), so that the laboring class would be dedicated to their undertakings.³⁸

Confucianism lost its sway after the May Fourth Movement and the Communist Revolution. While communism, adopting a singular vision of modernization, saw urban life as a higher form of society (in a rare instance in which capitalists were given credit, Marx said, "The bourgeoisie had rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life")³⁹, the Chinese Communist Party innovated Marxism, and its own rise was inextricably linked to rural roots. Defeated in the cities, the party went to the country and gained its ultimate strength there—known as the strategy of "the countryside surrounding the city." During the Maoist era, the laboring people (劳动人民) were upheld as the nation's masters. Mao famously said, "The issue of peasants is the fundamental issue of the Chinese

38. Zeng Xiongsheng, "Ruxue yu zhongguo chuantong nongxue" (Confucianism and traditional Chinese agriculturalism), *Traditional Culture and Modernization* 6 (1995): 55–62.

39. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1975), 14.

revolution. . . . Raising mass cultural awareness means elevating the cultural awareness of peasants.”⁴⁰

After the cultural revolution, the party reoriented itself and embraced market economy while sticking to political authoritarianism, leading to a loss of ideological hegemony. The successive party leaderships resorted to nationalism to fill the ideological vacuum and drew from the rich Chinese traditions to buttress their legitimacy. The Confucius revival since the start of the twenty-first century placed state-led nationalism on a broad, popular footing.⁴¹ Meanwhile, China’s economic transformation and urbanization has produced a massive exodus of peasants who left the rural areas (hence losing connection to the land) in search of higher-paying jobs in cities. China’s urban population exceeded its rural population for the first time in 2012. But during this massive migration, farmers lost their subject status while the vast rural areas lost vitality. Six hundred million Chinese today still live under a monthly income of 1,000 yuan and most of them live in the countryside.⁴² The widening urban-rural gap is one of the most serious social problems that the party has to tackle if it wants to realize the ambition of achieving common prosperity by 2035. As such, the revitalization of rural China has become the top priority of the Xi Jinping administration, which tries to simultaneously spearhead innovation in agricultural science and technology and to graft ancient Chinese values onto the country’s modernization.

These developments point to the complex role of the contemporary Chinese state in mediating tradition and modernity. Its policy of pursuing a market economy and urbanization-driven development has led to the marginalization of the country. Meanwhile, in embracing the commodification

40. Mao Tse-Tung, “On New Democracy” (Xin minzhu zhuyi), in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967).

41. Florian Schneider, *Staging China: The Politics of Mass Spectacle* (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2020).

42. Zhou Xin, “Is China Rich or Poor? Nation’s Wealth Debate Muddled by Conflicting Government Data,” *South China Morning Post*, May 29, 2020.

of culture, the party-state is no longer an agitator in a Maoist-style politicized culture but more of a cheerleader in a demobilized culture driven by the market. However, the widening urban-rural gap impedes further growth, and once again rural development is elevated to strategic importance. By tapping into the symbolic power of Li Ziqi in her double identity as a farmer and as a social media celebrity, the state positions itself as a mediator of tradition and modernity and, by extension, of the urban-rural conflicts.

As a food and lifestyle vlogger, Li's defining role is a farmer. Food connotes intimacy to soil, active cultivation, and a vital source of life for the city. Indeed, food security is the most fundamental concern facing every nation. Here, Li seems well poised as the poster girl of the party's policy priority to rejuvenate the rural area. She has since been recruited into a number of government initiatives to alleviate rural poverty, including her appointment as an "ambassador" to a Communist Youth League-sponsored campaign to help rural youth become rich and her participation in the Chinese Farmers' Festival sponsored by the Ministry of Agriculture. This opens a new chapter in the good old party practice of setting up a grassroots role model to serve the socialist cause. A *Strait Times* op-ed piece that referred to Li's videos as "a window to a parallel universe in which it was not Chairman Mao who won the Chinese Civil War, but Walt Disney"⁴³ captures the gist of the party's publicity strategy tailored to the new media age. While consumerism had no place for agitating the masses under a mobilized political culture, four decades into China's reform and opening up, the mechanism for selecting a grassroots role model has gone to the market while the state learns to co-opt the fame of a market-incubated rural microcelebrity in a post-hoc manner. But at the same time, the state's validation of production-centered rural values instead of an outright celebration of consumerism indicates that it

43. John Lui, "Gig Economy: Staying at Home 24/7 Is Now Possible, but Should You?" *Strait Times*, January 4, 2020.

is paying tribute to its socialist origin and the country's traditional cultural roots. But herein also lies the contradiction.

For instance, in one project, the website of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection enlisted Li's video on rice farming to promote the party's "Clean the Plate" campaign against food waste,⁴⁴ which is part of the new national strategy of ensuring food security amid domestic and international uncertainty (e.g., the COVID-19 pandemic and natural disasters), echoing Xi Jinping's admonition that "the rice bowl of China must be firmly held in Chinese hands."⁴⁵ On the surface, Li Ziqi does seem the perfect candidate to promote the campaign, as her videos can be read as an ode to rural labor. But at the same time, her qualifications as an ambassador for the campaign are predicated on the symbolic fame she achieved via social media, whose very culture is essentially a celebration of consumerism.

This said, Li's initiation to the country's role model does form a sharp contrast to the fate awaiting those microcelebrities who are linked to the "rural" in a pejorative sense—that is, the Tuwei livestreamers who became popular by posing themselves as gluttons and who were seen to represent a perverse form of consumerism and the opposite to values like thrift. While Li Ziqi was being elevated by officials, the propaganda authorities closed in on livestreamers who performed binge eating to attract online traffic. In any case, the state enlists the power of the market in celebrity manufacturing in its fight against excessive consumption, even as its official policy implicitly endorses consumerism.

The other part of the state's validation of Li is more directly related to her role as a social media influencer in promoting traditional culture. Unlike food, "media" is considered an innovation of the city and entails the creation

44. "A Special Programme by the Website of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection: Follow Li Ziqi in Discovering the Life of Rice," Website of the State Supervision Commission of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, August 25, 2020, <http://v.ccdi.gov.cn/2020/08/25/VIDEuvfbPAke0Uvzf6Qx02Xr200825.shtml>.

45. Frank Tang, "China's Xi Jinping Vows New Push to Revitalize Rural Economy in Post-Coronavirus World of Uncertainty," *South China Morning Post*, December 30, 2020.

of mediated spectacles for consumption. After all, it is the technological affordance of social media that confers mobility on Li, enabling her presentation of a pastoral life to be appreciated by millions of urbanites. In this sense, Li realized the government's Internet+ strategy by tapping into the potential of interactive media and became a successful cultural entrepreneur. Because of this, she was invited to the "Dialogue between Asian Civilizations", a conference under the "One Belt, One Road" initiative, and met with the royal family of Malaysia, to whom her handmade stationery was presented as gifts. She also partnered with leading official brands in the preservation of traditional culture, such as the Palace Museum in Beijing, as a government gesture to create more synergy between the official and the grassroots players in the cultural field.⁴⁶

Just like the irony implicit in Li's role in the campaign against food waste, in which a microcelebrity cultivated by a consumerism-inflected culture was enlisted to fight excessive consumption, here, the latest form of media technology plays a key role in promoting traditional values, such as harmony between humans and nature and filial piety. In fact, the mobility of the new technology facilitates the retrenchment of rural identity. Similarly, identifying Li Ziqi as a role model in the rural rejuvenation drive is a little odd because, after all, Li's portrayal of the pastoral idyll is far removed from a world of modern farming technologies, which is precisely the centerpiece of the rural revitalization strategy. These little oddities notwithstanding, affirming the state's commitment to rural development through a popular icon is perhaps the more important message here.

All in all, while the market's penchant for "a universally human" narrative reduces the texture of rural life into a spectacle for global consumption with its hidden class-based taste preferences, the state's incorporation of Li into various policy initiatives shows its resolve to reduce the substantive

46. Li Wei. "Jiemi Li Ziqi baohong beihou de ta: weibo, wanghong datuishou, xinmeiti touzija" (Uncovering the mysterious man behind Li Ziqi's rise to fame: Incubator for microcelebrity and investor in the new media), *The Lens*, December 12, 2019, <https://new.qq.com/omn/20191212/20191212A0F0OX00.html>.

inequality between the country and the city, as well as its intent to promote traditional Chinese culture overseas. In a quixotic way, by making Li Ziqi a social media icon, the market uses the rural as a resource to meet the urban desire for and consumption of the pastoral. Meanwhile the state reappropriates the icon of marketized media to help the disadvantaged rural other regain its agency. Here, the state is trying to play an integrative role that bridges the urban-rural divide, despite the many contradictions during this process.

Conclusion

At a fundamental level, food and media technology occupy opposite ends of the material spectrum and symbolize rural and urban civilization, respectively. When combined in the new cultural form of food vlogging, they mediate the fundamental human aspirations—“the idea of pastoral innocence” versus “the city as a civilizing agency”—in interesting and complex ways. This article examines the rise of food and lifestyle vlogger Li Ziqi, whose “isolated DIY fantasy world offers both dreamy escape and a lesson in self-reliance”⁴⁷ and wins her popularity in both Chinese and overseas-based social media platforms. Specifically, the article studies how the construction of her authenticity—at the heart of which is a desire for the pastoral by urbanites in contemporary society—is intimately associated with structural forces, including the market, the state, social media technology, and the public responses represented by media.

Both the market and the state take an active interest in appropriating the traditional way of Chinese life represented by Li Ziqi, though with different manifestations. This is perhaps natural, considering that both are institutions growing out of urban civilization vis-à-vis the country. Because the social media field largely operates according to the principles of market

47. Tejal Rao, “A Fantasy Princess Living off the Land,” *New York Times*, April 29, 2020, P3.

capitalism, the market's influence can be felt throughout the celebrification of Li Ziqi. The offering up of the pastoral desire for urban consumption, leading to the reaffirmation of the privilege of the urban, is a familiar line of critique in cultural studies. But the terms of such consumption—that is, the production and dissemination of Li Ziqi's content—deserves closer scrutiny. As a vlogger, Li's niche lies in her idealized presentation of rural life, particularly farming activities. But the visualization of her productive activities is more like a new face of consumerism, which is the latest manifestation of the market's unrelenting quest for novelty and uniqueness. Meanwhile, social media technology, which deterritorializes farming life, provides Li with the capacity to reach her fans around the world while fixing her identity as local, isolated, and uncorrupted by urban influence.

However, the lived experience of the half-billion rural population cannot be merely reduced to a single spectacle. Even across China's media landscape, the pastoral idyll portrayed by Li has to compete with other images, such as the "carnavalesque rural China" invoked in the Tuwei videos and the "decaying rural China" featured in realism-themed films and literary works. These images present a far less flattering image of rural China, whose identity can no longer be kept intact from the onslaught of urbanization. They also bring into sharp relief social problems, such as the population exodus and the widening urban-rural gap, which call for redress by the state. The contested representations of the "rural other" partly explain the lack of consensus over Li Ziqi's authenticity within China, which contrasts with her near universal acclaim overseas. Meanwhile, the state is quick to tap into the cultural resonance that Li Ziqi builds with viewers at home and abroad for its own policy agenda.

Since the disembedding of the city from the country, the latter has always been in a subordinate position, whose main role lies in providing material subsistence for the city, which enjoys a more thriving cultural life. But today, in China's seemingly unstoppable modernization drive (and similarly elsewhere), the alienated urban self seems constantly in need of nourishment by the values that the country stands for while the "backward"

country needs material support from the city in the form of advanced science and technology, as well as modern media. Promoting mutual consumption between the country and the city seems to be the implicit message in the Chinese government's rural rejuvenation design. Here, different from the market's role in distinction making, the Chinese state tries to position itself as an integrative force, to bridge the urban-rural gap, and to restore the lost agency of the rural population. This will be done through "bringing the urban civilization to the country" in the form of promoting the diffusion of not only science and technology but also new media and the concept of consumerism, so as "to make farming efficient, the countryside good for living, and the country's peasants rich."⁴⁸ Meanwhile, it will also bring the country to the city, not only by ensuring food security and agricultural development but also through encouraging cultural entrepreneurship among the rural population, in which Li Ziqi stands out as a role model. The state's response to the Li Ziqi phenomenon in particular, and its agricultural policy in general, is a reflection of its approach to tradition and modernity. As Hubbert put it, "China did not locate tradition as antithetical to modernity but instead wed cultural history and heritage to economic growth and technological advancement to offer tradition as a prescription for addressing modernity's putative hazards."⁴⁹ Such state initiative often results in a cultural nationalism that is part postmodern consumerism, part socialist realism, and part traditional Confucianism, though its realization is not without challenge.

The convergence of these forces can be gleaned from Li Ziqi's most recent appearance on Weibo Night in February 2021. As the Chinese microblogging site's equivalent to the Oscars, the event gathers the most prominent mass media celebrities and newly minted social media microcelebrities, in which Li was awarded "Weibo Person of the Year." For the occasion, instead

48. Orange Wang, "China's Food Security at Core of Beijing's New Five-Year Rural-Revitalization Plan," *South China Morning Post*, February 23, 2021.

49. Jennifer Hubbert, "Back to the Future: The Politics of Culture at the Shanghai Expo," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 20, no. 1 (2017): 48–64, 51.

of couture gowns, Li wore a rather modest summer mint chiffon dress and a jacket with Chinese embroidery. A hairpin made of bamboo leaves indicated her rustic roots. In interviews with media, she said she was thinking about her grandmother back home and the vegetables she grew in her backyard, which had just sprouted and needed caring. But as she walked the red carpet along with the nation's hottest media stars—albeit a bit shyly—her role as a “microcelebrity” trumped her role as a “country girl.” Her look for the night was scrutinized against those of other celebrities and made the tabloids’ gossip column in the following days. But the other facet of reality—which is more lackluster—consisted of increasing complaints from consumers online of quality problems found within her brand of food/snacks, whose production she had outsourced to certain factories. A new round of debate on food safety followed, with calls for more government regulation on microcelebrities. So, the story of Li Ziqi goes on, offering us a rich text in studying the “structure of feeling” of our era—namely, the nostalgia for a pristine way of life in late modernity that is being negotiated by various stakeholders, via food vlogging.

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