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RESEARCH

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# An analysis of cultural dissemination and national image construction in Chinese influencer Li Ziqi's vlogs and its impact on international viewer perceptions on YouTube

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## Abstract

International social exchanges have always been important to China's cultural soft power and image construction overseas. This study focuses on an internationally renowned mega influencer Li Ziqi and her vlogs on YouTube. These orchestrated vlogs tell stories of rural Chinese life and construct a desirable traditional Chinese rural culture for netizens at home and abroad. Informed by framing and cultivation theory, this study examines how user-generated content on national images can affect social media users' perceptions of reality. Content analysis is used to analyze the visual portrayals of Chinese rural culture, including its customs and values, aesthetics, and cultural and scenic places in Li's vlogs. Discourse analysis is further used to examine user comments and demonstrate her vlog content's impact on user perceptions of Chinese rural culture. This study sheds light on how a complex and hybrid national image with 'Chineseness' and a personal image with self-Orientalized and performed 'soft but independent' Chinese rural female image, is constructed by a social media influencer Li Ziqi with affective associations. At a conceptual and practical level, the findings of this study contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussions on how China engages with the globalized world through cultural diplomacy from the bottom-up, while existing research primarily takes a top-down approach.

**Keywords:** Li Ziqi, Influencer, Self-orientalism, Cultural dissemination, National image construction, Cultural diplomacy, Cultural soft power

## Introduction

Social media platforms are known for their many-to-many communication and interactivity, supported by rich media formats such as short videos and sophisticated feedback loops. Tech giants such as TikTok and YouTube also foster ecosystems that bring together media enterprises, influencers, and audiences. In particular, the dynamic flows of information and communication on social media have also allowed the public to become opinion leaders and mega influencers (Yesiloglu and Costello 2021), affecting countries' international relationships by shaping and affecting public opinions about

a country's image (Anholt 2009). Against this background, born in the Sichuan countryside, a mega influencer, Li Ziqi has been producing short vlogs about rural Chinese life since 2015. Li's videos have become popular at home and abroad, with a fan base of 16.4 million YouTube subscribers (Liang 2022) and 22 million followers on the Chinese microblogging site Weibo (Yan 2020). Her fame and influence are regularly reported and celebrated by netizens and mainstream media for 'repackaging rural China for urban fantasies' (Dai 2019). Li came under scrutiny in December 2019 when fans and anti-fans debated various 'authentic,' 'backward,' and 'staged' portrayals of rural China in her YouTube vlogs (Liang 2022). However, China's state-owned legacy media and the state quickly jumped on Li's bandwagon, endorsing her popularity in the West would make China more attractive and signifying the first instance of a microcelebrity appearing in China's official soft power discourse (Liang 2022). Li's 'cultural nationalism' is also entrenched in the market/consumerist discourse (Liang 2022), notwithstanding that her digital persona is both part of the entertainment industry and marketing collateral that helps Li to promote her online agricultural brand (the Li Ziqi shop). The Chinese state attempts to align Li's entrepreneurial success with China's socialist value of 'equality,' according to Liang (2022), which posits her as a role model who tackles urban-rural inequality in the archetypal Communist-era propaganda fashion of serving the socialist cause. It is hardly surprising that the Xi Jinping administration wants to revitalize rural China and graft socialist principles onto the country's modernization, given the expanding rural-urban divide in China and the goal of eradicating poverty by 2035 (Liang 2022).

Xi Jinping's notion of 'telling China's stories well' (讲好中国故事) to the international community is central to China's soft power building (Schultz and Zhang 2022). The government's top-down 'digital diplomacy' approach is also about endorsing a positive image across multiple social media platforms, which include state and non-state actors, to be as effective as possible in creating a cohesive and dialogic metanarrative of the country (Zhang and Ma 2022). Therefore, Li's vlogs and her subjective portrayals of 'Chineseness' through rural culture cannot be separated from this external strategic communication of China's diplomatic discourses of making China's story a cohesive reality. This trend is characteristic of policymaking in China (Creemers 2015). However, it can often fail to convey the desirable message, especially in the west, considering the irrelevance or resentment of China's global image (Silver et al. 2021). Clear evidence of this is China's national image after the Beijing 2008 Olympics, as some transnational opinion polls suggest, 'failed to win over the hearts of the Western public,' where western mass and social media played an important role in critiquing China (Manzenreiter 2010: 42). However, Li's YouTube channel has been well received among global audiences. It offers a much-neglected case where people-to-people communication on social media can enhance Chinese soft power.

This study examines how Li and her vlogs largely fuel a self-Orientalized depiction of rural China (Chinese cuisine, pastoral heritage, women, relationships), packaged and captured by a capitalist and consumerist logic but endorsed by the state. Li essentially performs the 'Othered' Western portrayals of the non-West to strategically obtain recognition and place herself within the Western-dominated global economy, system, and order (see Kobayashi et.al. 2017). Such self-orientalism is both performed on the

surface—the video production value of a soft and feminine rural digital repertoire; real at the center—an independent woman deeply rooted in an arduous upbringing; and further embedded in Chinese socialist values such as civility, equality, dedication, harmony, prosperity, integrity, and friendship. Such values are part of the Communist Party of China's (CPC) legitimization strategy within the Chinese Dream discourse (Ying 2021). Li is, therefore, a complex boundary-crosser in the sense that she is all at once authentic in her entrenched farmer roots to the rural land, market-oriented and commercial as a celebrity vlogger, digital creator, entrepreneur, and media persona, and valuable to China as a soft power 'tool,' all of which have been endorsed by the state (Liang 2022).

According to Becard and Filho (2019), in China, the term *cultural soft power* has replaced the terms *soft power* and *cultural diplomacy*. It is because China's soft power relies heavily on culture, as seen by the frequent usage of the term *cultural soft power* in state rhetoric on cultural reform, the promotion of socialist core values, and the advancement of the cultural industries (Becard and Filho 2019). Therefore, the state's use of culture is a power tool that controls the narratives of publicity overseas and determines what enters the country (Becard and Filho 2019). However, few studies have examined how Chinese digital creators are part of China's *cultural soft power* initiatives, how these digital creators depict China and narrate Chinese stories from the bottom-up to people overseas, or the overseas' attitudes towards these stories, with few recent exceptions (Ewen 2021). Li Ziqi's contribution to China's cultural diplomacy efforts and how these efforts are seen abroad is the focus of this study, which attempts to contribute to the continuing scholarly conversation about China's cultural soft power.

Informed by framing and cultivation theory, this study examines how user-generated content (UGC) on national images can affect social media users' constructions of reality. Content analysis is used to analyze the visual portrayals of Chinese culture, including its customs and values, aesthetics, and cultural and scenic places in Li's vlogs. Discourse analysis is further used to examine international viewers' perceptions of Li's representations of Chinese culture. Our findings suggest Li's vlogs are contributing to successfully constructing a positive national image for China, emphasized by the largely favorable perceptions of Chinese rural culture among international YouTube users. The study further explains why Li's short vlogs are popular abroad, namely the enigmatic 'performed' but 'authentic' self-orientalized characteristics of these videos, contributing to China's existing efforts to construct its positive national image overseas.

## Literature review

### Digital creator, cultural ambassador, and national image constructor

Li's fame started with her rural roots and arduous upbringing, an underdog-turned-golden phoenix transformation story. Her parents divorced when she was young, and her father died young when she was only six. Her grandparents went on to raise her in the Sichuan countryside. Li's grandfather later passed away, and her grandmother raised her until she was fourteen and it was no longer financially sustainable. Li dropped out of school and went out to find work, but later she chose to return to her hometown to take care of her grandmother. Once there, Li learned the fundamentals of video editing from her older brother, who would post guitar vlogs on the social media platform Meipai. She

primarily focused on vlogging herself and her grandmother until her efforts became popular on Meipai, leading to her fame as a mega influencer (Tee 2021).

Research on digital creators, influencers, and micro-celebrities is booming in the developed West and developing Asia (Abidin 2018). Some have focused on how digital platforms empower users to express themselves and create a participatory culture with their collective intelligence (Jenkins 2013) and entrepreneurial endeavors (Cunningham and Craig 2016). Some groups would advance a political agenda in the public sphere, i.e., celebrity politicians (Wheeler 2013), while others find and create their private spheres and blur the boundaries between the public and the private. Cunningham and Craig (2016) warned the western world that a digital China with its scale and diversity could not be neglected economically or politically, even though such success is largely entertainment oriented. Among this, the multi-channel network (MCN) has become a new business model to scout, train, package, and promote online micro-celebrities, who have garnered comparable influence against their counterparts in the traditional entertainment industries (Cunningham and Craig 2016). These micro-celebrities are 'natural and authentic' spokespersons for commerce and self-branded products and services (Cunningham et al. 2016), who start their career as content creators on social media, and their primary strategy is to commodify themselves and make themselves a brand (Chen and Whyke 2022). Initially, as a non-commercial endeavor, the UGC gradually becomes PGC (professional-generated content) with a matrix of multi-channeled networks (Paulussen and Ugille 2008). Such a UGC-to-PGC transformation converges with the booming social media platforms such as Red (Xiaohongshu), TikTok, Weibo, WeChat, Kuaishou, Bilibili, as well as international platforms such as Twitch, Instagram, and YouTube. We see the emergence and convergence of e-commerce and s-commerce (social commerce), where e-commerce platforms monetize users' sociality while social media platforms transform themselves into social-selling of commodities (Chen and Cheung 2020), including online celebrities themselves (Smith 2014; Chen 2021).

In a Chinese context, it is difficult to separate the personal and the national since digital creators not only *create* a nation of their followers but also *create for* a nation that they are part of. Li initially only created videos for a domestic audience, and her presence on YouTube has become part of the MCN promotion while YouTube continues to be banned on China's mainland. Li has become the cultural ambassador of China, thus endorsed by the state-owned CCTV (China Central Television), largely because of the media impact she generated at home and, more importantly, abroad (Jung 2019). It is a case worthy of careful examination in terms of the images created, the strategies adopted, and the impact generated.

Li is now part of China's cultural soft power endeavors engineered by the state, as what she creates is in line with what the state promotes and, in this case, positive associations with Chinese rural culture, where we adopt an enumerative definition, including its food culture, crafts, people, landscape, custom, aesthetics, and values. All these aspects have been featured in Li's digital repertoire; thus, the 'Chineseness' she constructs is touchable, perceptible, and tradable. For example, Li Ziqi, as a successful entrepreneur, has been incorporated and endorsed by the state in various creative ways. According to Baidupedia (2020), following her mega influencer status, Li was named a national top 10 food and cooking personalities on Sina Weibo in 2017. She received a dozen national

awards following her YouTube debut in 2018. What makes her influential in the cultural sphere includes the multiple hats she wears for (semi-)governmental bodies because of her promotion endeavors of Chinese culture. These include, but are not limited to, the Ambassador of Intangible Cultural Heritage for Chengdu City, Annual Cultural Communication Personality, and Ambassador for the Chinese Farmers' Harvesting Festival by the Ministry of Agriculture of PRC. In 2020, she was elected a committee member of the 13th Communist Youth League Central Committee. These many 'masks' make her a well-known brand and personality (Alexander 2008), from a high school dropout to a congresswoman (Wang 2021). In short, she is endorsed by the government, the media, and commercially oriented social media platforms for her re-ruralized digital media work and persona construction. This has been attributed to her cultural soft power (Xu 2020) measured by social media data and state endorsement, and her economic success and social impact demonstrated through re-making the rural attractive to an international audience. More significant is that her digital repertoire and media sensation make people talk *about* her and study her in international communication (Xu 2020; Ji 2020). Therefore, she becomes a symbol of Chineseness and a vehicle for new and creative expressions and productions. This also justifies Li as a representative case for digital creators and entrepreneurs in and for China, whose content is also carefully orchestrated in line with the CPC's officially endorsed socialist values and beliefs such as equality, dedication, civility, harmony, prosperity, integrity, and friendship.

It is important to highlight that recent research about the 'Li Ziqi phenomenon' focuses on her production value, business strategies, and mixed reception by a Chinese audience (Xu 2020). Li's online personality has attracted much criticism, if not trolling, from business competitors and some Chinese users, who question the authenticity of her works—for not authentically representing Chinese rural life since it fits too well with an 'othered' and 'romanticized' view of China. 'Othered' refers to the problematic orientalist depiction of an 'unabashedly romantic depiction of country life' or 'elaborate, traditional dress' that remains impeccably clean during laborious farm work (Dai 2019), among others. We frame this as a copyrighted patriotism and exquisitely packaged 'soft China' that reflect the divided and converged (thus paradoxical) stances on patriarchal patriotism and misogyny on Chinese social media. Few studies focus on Li's international communication significance, with some exceptions using a cross-cultural perspective (Ji 2020), which makes our study a much-needed contribution to studying international perceptions of Chinese cultural soft power on social media and the role such influencers and media production play in contributing to China's national image construction. *The Paper* reports a study by Alfred Data Lab (2019), where 69,970 comments posted by 63,768 users under the top three vlogs by Li were collected and analyzed. Li's YouTube video impression totals 9,670,000, which is ten times higher than her MCN presence on Bilibili in China. The likes and dislikes on YouTube are 45:1, which shows a dominantly positive and affective following, manifested from textual comments and emojis. Based on her fans' tagging, the most engaged fans are from the United States, India, Vietnam, Indonesia, Russia, Brazil, the UK, Korea, the Philippines, and Canada. The top 10 languages used are English (more than 50%), Chinese, Vietnamese, Russian, Spanish, Japanese, Portuguese, Arabic, Korean, and Thai (Alfred Data Lab 2019). Critical scholars may question what these figures translate to; however, in public relations and political

communication, it is hard to neglect the mutual shaping forces between celebrities as politicians and politicians as celebrities (Pace and Rosamond 2018).

### **Framing the Li Ziqi effect through cultivation**

In today's digital era, it is essential to understand that social media content and influencers like Li Ziqi have the potential to construct a positive national image. It is necessary to make a conceptual differentiation between influencers and internet celebrities who are famous online. An influencer is usually known for their craft and expertise, while an internet celebrity relies less on what value they present, and the definition focuses more on their fame and status. Li has garnered celebrity status in international social media and legacy media as a cultural and lifestyle influencer. The MCN and cross-platform promotion thereby generate a social icon that is also value-laden. Such content creators and influencers always intersect with the government's orchestration of public opinions (King et al. 2017).

Bringing the personal and national together, viewers' perceptions of national images can be affected and reflected by such content creation. Therefore, we apply framing and cultivation theory to examine how UGC on national images can affect social media users' constructions of reality since the content of famous social media influencers have framing strategies and cultivation effects (Cheng et al. 2016). Framing theory explains the media messages' impact on people's opinions. Framing can indicate the shaping of consumers' perceptions based on the media's depiction of a subject (Scheufele 1999). Framing theory explains the strong impact the media's purposeful representations (i.e., message frames) of certain issues can have on people's interpretations, which in turn affects their opinions or attitudes. Initially developed in television studies, cultivation theory goes further by examining how repeated media consumption influences viewers' perceptions of the real world when the viewers' worldviews match those mediated representations (Gerbner 1969; Gerbner and Gross 1976). As such, it is assumed that the realistic descriptions of the world in media strongly influence how the message distorts or constructs viewers' ideology and perceptions of their own realities.

This study recognizes the applicability of cultivation theory to social media contexts such as YouTube—Li Ziqi's central point of communication with Western viewers—because there are similarities between the conditions of the study of original cultivation theory and the cultivation processes of social media. In this context, the influence of social media platforms such as YouTube has been largely overlooked (Gehl 2009). YouTube may strongly influence users because of the socially perceived 'reality' of the platform, and its videos may have greater power to cultivate a viewer's perception and ideology than more traditional media (Gehl 2009). A major reason for this can be found in Tufekci's (2018) argument that YouTube is the 'great radicalizer'—an 'engine of extremism by recommendation'—because its search algorithm is particularly exceptional in that the more a user watches a certain category of video the more likely the search engine is to recommend that category of video to the user. The novelty of YouTube videos and the algorithmic search engine, therefore, combine to create a 'rabbit hole behavior' in which some portion of the users stay on the site longer (Tufekci 2018). It means that users' choice of videos reflects their realities in social media messages using visual and auditory message formats. While YouTube has obvious social media

functions such as 'sharing,' 'liking,' and 'commenting,' some studies show that YouTube is a new channel of media transmission that has become a video repository for TV channels (video-on-demand). Despite the alternative uses by viewers, YouTube can be regarded as an extension of conventional broadcasting strategies of media convergence (Murschetz 2016; González-Neira et al. 2021). YouTube speaks to traditional broadcasting media akin to television in that producers' videos reflect one-to-many communication through well-produced and scheduled videos, which viewers can re-watch. It is significant, considering that cultivation theory was conceived in the context of how content creators' purposeful repertoire might influence the way people think and what they believe through repetitive viewing (Potter 2014: 1016).

The creation and editing of YouTube videos are based on the subjectivities of the creators and thus can affect the viewers' perceptions. Based on the creators' intentions, they may add, delete, or edit scenes, issues or subjects in their production, thereby giving the creator the potential to exaggerate or dramatize the messages they portray and consequently affect the viewers' logical and emotional judgments about the subjects or issues presented. Also, the capacity for users to repeatedly share favorite YouTube videos can strengthen framed messages and cultivation effects, which in turn affect how the viewers' realities are constructed. When an audience accepts knowledge with pleasure and anticipates learning more about a topic particularly offered by a person of interest, cultivation effects will manifest (Shrum 2002: 90). Cultivation theory may therefore be seen in the interaction between a YouTube vlogger and a subscriber when a viewer follows and tracks intensively particular content producers like Li Ziqi and their activities on YouTube. As Strangelove (2010) likewise recognizes, YouTube is more than just a video library; it is also a social place. YouTube videos with UGC are not just new media portrayals of home and family life; they are also outlets for individuals to express themselves, engage with others, and proclaim their opinions on public matters, which suits our study of Li's value-laden video production.

The cultivation effects and subjective messages of social media content on YouTube can thus be better understood through cultivation theory and framing theory. Previous studies have examined the content and communication of social media and its applications and influence in politics (Parmelee 2014), in comprehending social trends (Jacobson 2013), and in constructing positive national images (Chen 2012). Therefore, social media studies have discovered that through cultivation effects, people's attitudes and perceptions can be framed and influenced by social media and its assemblage of content, subjects, technology and sociality. Other studies have demonstrated that the production, circulation, and consumption of visual cultural symbols on social media have become a huge global cultural market, especially in intercultural communication (Park et al. 2014). This phenomenon 'brings new urgency to questions about the effects of social media on cultural convergence. Video-sharing social media like YouTube provide access to diverse cultural products from all over the world' (Park et al. 2014: 336), where cultural values are embedded in UGC that can be consumed by both local and transcultural audiences (Park et al. 2017). Video-sharing platforms such as YouTube are more prone to be accepted by a transnational audience than message-sharing services such as Twitter due to an audio-visual culture based on videos, whose universal language can enhance intercultural communication (Baek 2015). This points to the fact that in the digitalized world,

western audiences and eastern content producers, and vice-versa, can find a cosmopolitan mutual translation of transculturality, nurturing *some form of flexibility and affinity* (Thussu 2021). Video-sharing content is consequently becoming an active stage for the transnational transmission flows, influence, and trans-cultural acceptance of social media content.

In this context, this study focuses on the influence of Chinese YouTube vlogger Li Ziqi's depictions of traditional Chinese rural culture on international perceptions of China's cultural dissemination and, consequently, how it contributes to China's national image construction. As established, because YouTube has both traditional (i.e., visual and auditory message) and new media (i.e., online interaction) characteristics, it is appropriate to apply framing theory and cultivation theory to analyze the effects of Li's videos on international users' perceptions.

### **Methodology**

This study follows the definition of qualitative content analysis as a 'research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from texts (or other meaningful matter) to the context of their use' (Krippendorff 2004: 18). Content analysis is used to discover the underlying themes or categories in a media text being analyzed and interpreted, and then situates the findings of that text within the context in which the content was produced (Bryman 2004). In contrast to analog media, the online text is portrayed as short-lived and changing; it is worth observing that online media texts are bestowed with different qualities. Thus, applying the established content analysis method to vlogs should involve some modifications (Karlsson 2012). Since Li's vlogs (understood here as texts) and the cultural dissemination and national image construction are central to this study, it is necessary to analyze her works according to the representations and images, that is, her depiction of rural China. Specifically, dimensions of China's national image were measured by using Buhmann and Ingenhoff's (2015) theoretical framework of the 4D model of the country image. Based on the framework, this study specifically explored Li Ziqi's videos for images and depictions of Chinese customs and values (i.e., normative dimension) and Chinese cultural and scenic places (aesthetic dimension) (see more below). This study examined only visual portrayals of each dimension and the components of the dimensions from the YouTube videos. It is because the coding and transmission of information in Li's video rely more on the display of non-verbal signs and emphasize the construction of the situation rather than the expression of words to reduce the cognitive bias triggered by linguistic signs in cross-cultural communication.

The purposeful depictions may also affect how people interpret certain issues and incoming information (Weaver 2007). As such, the research not only addresses rural China depicted in Li's YouTube vlogs but also utilizes discourse analysis to examine the impact of this content on user perceptions of Chinese culture. We intend to conceptualize subjective attitudes in the comments sections in line with the significant over-arching dimensions mentioned above, which can be framed against our research goal (Given et al. 2018). Last but not least, it brings out mental categories, which are the basis of the viewpoints found in users' discourses (Richardson 2006). Therefore, YouTube is appropriate for this research because it traces both the content

dimensions of Li's videos and the user comments that demonstrate the current attitudes towards Chinese culture among international audiences.

The data gathered for the study began by searching the keyword 'Li Ziqi' on YouTube, from where the authors were then able to enter Li's official YouTube page and look through her different uploaded playlists. The coding was organized around the relevant dimensions that emerged according to the video's contents, including the spreading of Chinese traditional food culture, intangible cultural heritage, and Li Ziqi's female image representation. The coding categories were made by implementing Buhmann and Ingenhoff's (2015) 4D model mentioned previously, which coded the samples' visual descriptions of rural China regarding the country's normative and aesthetic dimensions.

The normative dimension denotes a nation and, by and large, its society's values, customs, social forms, and culture (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015). Social learning and interaction form the customs and values reflected by the characterized cultures of a nation. A society's normative aspects can be reflected through its government systems, country leader, and organizations. Furthermore, the normative dimension includes popular culture elements because they reveal a society's cultural characteristics. The aesthetic dimension denotes a country's traditional or unique lifestyle, which includes natural environments, tourist places, foods, and architectural styles unique to that country (Buhmann and Ingenhoff 2015).

Here, it is important to note that both before and after Li Ziqi was endorsed by the Chinese state-owned media and became a national cultural ambassador (Wang 2021), her videos have consistently portrayed the positive aspects of the normative and aesthetic dimensions based on her (as a video creator) subjectivity and self-interest but also the interest of the nation. Positive descriptions essentially highlight the merits of a country by purposely describing a country's dimensions. These positive descriptions can be accentuated through the beautification of a video largely through editing and filming methods to emphasize the values of the dimensions. Visualization effects or purposeful selections of scenes are just some of the editing techniques that can drastically affect viewers' interpretations (Jeong 2008). In Li's vlogs, she portrays China's food culture, cultural heritage, and the female image in an aesthetically pleasing way (shot, edited, and post-produced) through documentary-like vlogs.

The combination of the above methods was completed by drawing upon different series in Li's video playlists, which range from 'traditional handicraft,' 'seasonal videos,' and 'Chinese food festivals' to 'Oriental intangible cultural heritage' and 'blooming flowers.' There is no specific selection process in these videos, albeit to say that their content is suited against the subsequent dimensions that the authors were coding under the categories and subcategories, each focusing on Chinese food culture, cultural heritages, and Li's own representation. Each vlog can last from 5 to 20 min. It is also important to clarify that due to the considerable amount of user comments Li receives for her videos, which typically exceed half a million, this study purposively sampled comments that are consistent with the normative and aesthetic dimensions under inquiry. This is in line with Max Weber's (1949) ideal-type strategy, where samples should not be selected upon their representativeness but their potential to address issues under investigation.

## Analysis and discussion

### The charm of Chinese cuisine

Li Ziqi is an out-and-out native Sichuanese, and the content of her vlogs is taken on-site in the countryside of Sichuan Province, including various traditional Sichuan cuisines, such as bean jelly, dried and pickled peppers, and shredded pork with garlic sauce. In these vlogs, Li is selective in her themes. In one series, she takes the viewer through cultivating ingredients, which involves nurturing and farming five grains and seasonal vegetables, fresh and dried fruits, meat, eggs, tea, wine, oil, salt, soy sauce, and vinegar. Li takes the viewer through the mouthwatering process of cooking these ingredients to the completion of a dish, which involves traditional handmade methods. International viewers are particularly impressed by her traditional cooking methods, commenting that 'I love watching her harvest and cook things from her own garden...she boils, roasts, and stir-fries all these dishes'; while others are generally captivated with what they see as a 'general' demonstration of Chinese culture in these food videos, stating that 'China must be very proud of her, she represents this whole amazing culture to the world.' These sampled comments are up-approved and thus top-ranked, demonstrating a positive reading of Chinese food culture. Such space around the aesthetics of food amplified by the videos creates an identitarian sense around 'good taste' that is reminiscent of the documentary *A Bite of China*, whose imagery also shaped a positive reaction towards the enjoyment of Chinese cuisine (Li 2016).

Li's videos are different from other YouTube celebrities examined by earlier research (Smith 2014), who are ordinary people being extraordinary through doing daily routines, creating a performed authenticity that is relatable to the viewers. However, Li's approach and strategy, as exposed through the shots used in her vlogs, are different because her routines are always a bit exaggerated and refined, which may distance some of the viewers looking for immediate engagement but has absorbed the attention of other viewers who are looking for and enjoying an aesthetic experience. Arguably, the most frequently used trope in these videos is the aesthetic dimension (i.e., the natural beauty and picturesque food). In another seasonal series, Li demonstrates to the audience the traditional Chinese method of turning soybean seeds into soy sauce as she collects the beans from the fields, cleans them, and picks out the stones. It occurs against the backdrop of the rising and setting of the sun in the fairy-tale-like Sichuan countryside, as Li uses the natural water source from the mountains to mix up the salt water and isolate the beans to purify them, after which she cools and bottles the hand-brewed soy sauce. Li then moves on to demonstrate how she uses the soy sauce to cook various ingredients, for instance, chicken, which is curated overnight and emerges with a glistening dark layer the next day. The video certainly positively affects the viewers in terms of their impressions of the aesthetically pleasing dimension of these food vlogs, where they state that the 'great video...started like a documentary of National Geographic...wow the chicken looks delicious!' The representation of Chinese dishes but also the aesthetic countryside backdrop against which Li films these attracts viewers and meets their interests, placing the diversity of Chinese rural culture as both a quest for cultural identity, as Meissner (2006) puts it, but also a search for recognition by the western 'Other.'

As Liang (2022) argued, the intersection between the media and the state has meant that food has become an appropriate symbol for promoting and branding a nation. For

the CPC, rural food production may play a more significant role in its public relations campaigns locally and internationally because of China's agrarian heritage. The positive depictions of rural food production in Li's vlogs, therefore, do not only appear to help to improve China's image as a nation with a fascinating food culture among overseas audiences but are also increasing viewers' intentions to visit China or, by extension, visit Li and her hometown in China. Such comments include, 'I want to come and live with you for a week...or maybe a year,' and 'I can't wait to go back to China with my husband and let him try such beautiful dishes.' Li Ziqi satisfies all the picturesque imaginations and realities of those overseas about Chinese culture by reproducing the self-Orientalized splendor of China's traditional food culture on screen in her own authentic home in Sichuan. Li presents us with a kind of 'illusory taste' that is not related to just any kind of delicious food but is the taste of home that she portrays on screen. For Li, the logic behind this is that celebrity, as a 'mask' (Alexander 2008), is subject to change through creating not an essence but a symbolic system. It means that not only are Li's videos deeply entrenched in the authenticity of her pure and simple countryside roots and arduous past, but they also create Chinese folklore of sorts, sustained by a set of representations and images relating to the 'fabulous' portrayal of traditional food culture and pastoral lifestyle, as the authors now proceed to examine.

#### **The allure of Chinese cultural heritage: delocalizing and imagining a pastoral life**

In her videos, Li can be seen in the countryside preparing, spinning, and weaving cotton, doing calligraphy with a Chinese brush, ink stick, ink slab, and paper, doing traditional Chinese craft or woodblock printing, or making hand-dyed blue calico dresses. The 'Oriental' pastoral lifestyle constructed by Li is creating a multicultural dialogue with those overseas through YouTube. With the advent of the post-industrial era, people are dominated by the false demands created by capitalism and consumerism: pretense, imitation, transitoriness, and superficiality (Shugart 2008). Escaping from this social depression has become an endogenous demand of modern urban residents inside and outside China. It explains the state's absorption of Li into numerous policy measures to lessen the urban-rural divide and its desire to promote rural Chinese culture abroad. Li embeds herself in this state discourse as a market resource to satisfy the urban desire for and consumption of the rural domestically and globally.

In Li's video on Shu Embroidery, also known as Sichuan embroidery, which is a traditional Chinese handicraft that originates from the folk people in the west of Sichuan province and has existed for thousands of years, she is pictured sitting in a traditional wooded Chinese pagoda set against a background of other pagodas viewable from the window as the snow falls outside. At the beginning of the video, she introduces several Shu Embroidery pictures decorated with Chinese cultural symbols such as giant pandas and lotus flowers. During the embroidery process, various needle methods are introduced, such as covering needles, diagonal laying needles, sand needles, rolling needles, and silk pattern needles, which are used to complete the patterns on an indigo silk dress. Li then proceeds to wear the dress, which attempts to show the unique charm of Chinese culture through bodily representations. As viewers comment, 'This is exactly how I imagine traditional Chinese culture' and 'I wish I could be there; it is a dreamland... I grew up thinking about how important nature is because of China's influence in my

country...I just don't really like capitalism and how money can make someone ruthless.' On the one hand, the pastoral life set against a background of a variety of traditional Chinese cultural heritages shaped by Li in her vlogs has given urbanites who are 'trapped' by life in the cities a 'pure land' in their imaginations, much like the Garden of Eden in the West. The international audience's comments resonate with the attempt of the state's official media outlets, as Zhang (2013) expounds, to portray an alternative discourse, that is still under construction and stands ambiguously between capitalism and communism. On the other hand, her mediated fantasies also risk blinding viewers to the other realities of the Chinese countryside, which have also been documented by Chinese filmmakers and represent the margins and poverty of the rural Chinese world (Berry et al. 2010).

This point is further highlighted in another Li's video that sees her collecting soybeans from the fields before going on to purify them in her rural kitchen. One user states, 'How I would love to live there, and work like she does. The natural beauty of this place is phenomenal'; and 'Her relationship with nature, wow, she does everything with harmony.' The pastoral lifestyle of embroidering clothes, harvesting, chopping wood, carrying water, and preparing food arouses the yearning for Utopia among foreign audiences. Audiences from various countries can enter a dialogue with Li's cultural productions through social media comments, likes, and other functions, sharing their dreams of peaceful pastoral life and demonstrating a like-minded pursuit of the state's socialist values, such as freedom and harmony between humans and nature. This idyllic pastoral ceremony enables people from different regions and countries to cross the boundaries of time and space, escape from industrial civilization, and generate relationality with traditional Chinese rural culture through the principle of common values. However, such a 'soft power' benchmarking of rural knowledge between the East and the West can be translated into an unfertile nostalgia, whose promises only deliver an imaginary utopia that might convey an innocent form of inaccurate fabulation. Foucault (1980) points to such regimes of knowledge as powerful institutionalized constituents of disguised coercion.

#### **Li's female image: shaping identification with the rural eastern woman**

The success of Li Ziqi's short videos overseas, in addition to the innovation in content and form, also stems from the construction of her image, which recognizes the importance of women in China and the West and provides a new perspective for China's external communication and national image construction. In 2015, Xi Jinping pointed out at the Global Women's Summit that China will more actively implement the basic national policy of gender equality, give full play to the role of women as a 'half of the sky,' and support women to make contributions and realize their ideals and dreams in life (FMPRC 2015). Women are central to China's future external cultural communication through its official discourse.

Unsurprisingly, Li's success in 'communicating with the outside world' via social media is endorsed by both the commercial platforms and the state. Li's personal image is a hybrid entity, represented in her vlogs through the normative dimension of traditional values and customs once relevant to Chinese women, such as diligence, dedication, virtuousness, and filial piety, and the independent female symbol in line

with Western discourses. Viewers seem to identify with the strong independent image of a hard-working young woman who has also given up city life for the countryside, harvesting corn and rice, making bamboo beds and fences, and driving tractors and milking cows without the need for a man to perform the traditionally perceived macho and physical labor. Li also takes good care of her grandmother and accepts such family responsibilities.

On the one hand, foreign viewers praise Li's traditional filial relationship with her grandmother, which is evident in their recognition of family empathy between the two, as her grandmother often acts as a silent assistant attending the kitchen fire, while at other times, is just affectionately watching Li's skillful cooking and crafting. This arouses the viewer's nostalgia for family affection, as one user comments on a vlog that sees Li knitting a blanket for her grandmother, 'As someone who was raised by grandmother, I was crying at the end of the video. I know I would do anything I could for my grandma and seeing her (Li) put so much time and effort into this for her grandma's comfort made me emotional.' On the other hand, Li is also praised for her strength in her daily endeavors, 'This woman is so inspiring, she's so hard working and passionate about everything she does,' and 'The embodiment of Chinese womanhood, combining strength, creativity, diligence, grace, independence, wisdom, and compassion.' Li is also dubbed as 'Mulan' or 'Disney Princess' by viewers who derive such notions from their memory of strong female characters in traditional Chinese and international stories. In one video, she appears in a red Mulan-esque gown riding a horse with one user stating, 'Let's sign a petition to Disney to make a princess character inspired from her (Li) who doesn't need a prince charming for her survival,' and 'In Disney she'd be the princess, her own prince, and the fairy godmother.'

Through Li Ziqi, the image construction of women's discourse between the East and the West has therefore achieved a fusion. Foreign netizens are moving towards the same recognition and appreciation of the modern-day Chinese family relationship and individualism, which now bridges the Chinese and Western definitions of 'humanity' and 'preference for individuality.' Indeed, present in Li Ziqi's self-Orientalized and performed 'soft but independent' expression of filial Chinese rural femininity and the resourceful women of two generations (Li and her grandmother) sticking together, there is a real arduous story, which inadvertently vindicates women trying to redefine a space that avoids patriarchal necessities. However, there is a subtle message behind the image of such a rural 'iron woman' that does not necessarily configure with the gender inequalities that contemporary Chinese rural women suffer from. Saiz (2001) has pointed out that such conflicts stem from women's occupational roles that are still subdued because of the familial endurances of conventional Confucian orthodoxy and the states' inability to foster gender equality. China's transforming economy has created opportunities for non-farm work jobs for those rural women who choose to migrate to the cities. However, there are still many non-migrant women who stay behind or feel the need to return to rural areas (Mu and Walle 2011). As a result of other migrating members of the household, many rural women must deal with an extra payload of rural work, or there are those rural women who return to the countryside simply because of the deeply entrenched gender ideology that demarcates their role predominantly as caregivers (Mu and Walle 2011; Fan and Chen 2020).

Such representation of Chinese women on social media is, nevertheless, new in the sense that it not only fills the gap of lacking and non-existent men but also fills the gap of women in hard-core agricultural labor. Such women-at-work in agricultural settings seldom get the opportunity to be presented in Chinese TV or films with a strong urban focus, while the portrayal of Chinese women who participate in domestic labors in well-decorated homes dominates Chinese screens. As for Li Ziqi, she only needs to create more sequences featuring these representations to sustain her positive image among foreign audiences. She will continue to use rural labor and beauty to attract her viewers, demonstrating her 'authenticity' through her 'performance' while constructing a 'national' image of the strong and independent Chinese woman of the new digital era and new China, and in turn, helping China to spread its soft power overseas.

#### **Scene reconstruction: behind (and in front of) the scenes of Li's vlogs**

Goffman (1973) put forward the concept of dramaturgical theory, which argued that life is an individual's endless play in which people are actors, and the script, stage, performer, and audience are all indispensable elements. Goffman distinguished between the frontstage and backstage, the former being 'that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance. Front, then, is the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his [or her] performance' (p. 13), and the latter is a place where 'the performer can relax'; drop their front, forgo speaking in their lines; 'and step out of character' (p. 71). It must be recognized that Li's videos constitute a dramatic stage in her life, adopting a singular narrative method, focusing the audience's attention through individual performances based on a pre-created script, and reducing the shift of attention caused by character switching.

Taking Li's vlogs today as a prime example, although the products displayed on the frontstage are more aesthetically appealing, the production process on backstage is also enigmatic. Li uses personal shooting locations, such as kitchens, courtyards, and bedrooms, to show her perspective of rural life. The polishing and production process of handmade products and the picking and production process of the food ingredients that all belong to the backstage scene are performed in front of the camera, thus breaking the gap between the frontstage and backstage. In this way, the materiality of the images and artifacts are presented in a way that conveys the information that allows audiences to come into greater contact with Chinese rural culture. These images and artifacts present a craftswoman, even if it is within the confines of popular culture in the digital age. Paraphrasing Sennett's main ideas of *The Crafts[wo]men* (2008), the matrix of crafty content found in the videos is sketching a thin line between form and function that attracts audiences to those backstage scenes presented through the lens while activating their imagination (Sennett 2008).

Li's videos also go further by using other techniques that fascinate the viewer. One of these is the clear genuine sounds to restore the physical scene and such 'white noise,' which also attracts an ASMR (auto sensory meridian response) from the YouTube community who find her videos therapeutic (Starr et al. 2020). A prime example is her vlog about an unforgettable childhood memory, the smell of cooked taro rice, which first shows Li working in the fields surrounded by the sounds of insects and birds, and then

by the sounds of rice as it sizzles in the wok, bringing audiences an immersive and atmospheric experience. Users post comments such as, 'I feel like I can smell what she is cooking...'; and 'That sound of taro rice in the wok, my goodness, it does so much for the senses.' Other videos also show similar instances, such as the sound of cutting meat and vegetables or the firewood crackling in the stove. Another example is in her vlog about the life of cotton, which relies largely on kinesics, which is bodily movement. The bodily movements here involve the labor-intensive process of spinning and weaving the cotton and making a blanket for her grandmother. Other scenes involve Li's grandmother smiling and slow-moving as she covers Li with a blanket as she sleeps or using medium shots to capture her movement in an idyllic and fairy-tale-like countryside, collecting ingredients accompanied by her dogs. There are instances where she moves between green forests, with branches, grass, and flowers blocking certain portions of the screen, and other times when she sits and does housework or simply eats.

Arguably then, it is Li's self-Orientalized 'performed' but also 'real' representation of Chinese culture in videos showing an individual's daily life that has a phenomenal following by overseas viewers. In the age of social media, she is a boundary breaker and digital nomad because of her rootedness in the land and her public persona. Viewers seem to identify with Li as both a video creator and a modern rural Chinese woman since the videos show scenes from her first-person view. Although Li is silent in these vlogs, she constantly communicates with viewers through her bodily experiences, sounds, chronemics (a cyclical view of time that determines both the diet and production of crops according to the four seasons), and the costume (traditional dress) all the while using the lens as if the viewers were standing alongside her. The audience can relate to the power of these nonverbal signs, which are able to cross national boundaries and penetrate language barriers. Content creators like Li put effort into editing videos using various movements, effects, sounds, and music since their videos reflect some extent of their identities. Therefore, the efforts of video creators like Li to enhance their content certainly help viewers immerse themselves in the vlogs. As a result, Li's videos will continue to contribute to developing a positive national image for China through her strategic and innovative depictions of Chinese cultures.

## **Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated how Li Ziqi's self-Orientalized short vlogs, a popular media form on YouTube, convey information and meaning about rural China, including traditional farming culture, food culture, cultural heritage, and Oriental aesthetics, in the form of daily narratives to overseas audiences, and how these vlogs have been received by those audiences. Her videos portray a complex and hybrid national and personal image that is at once an 'authentic' yet 'performed' image of herself. The hybridity manifests from her persona as an out-of-the-city woman who is also deeply interwoven with the power structure of the market, the state, and social media, as well as the public's perception of what it means to be a modern rural and female subject in China. It makes her case important in understanding how bottom-up and gender-progressive media representations and productions of Chinese rural and traditional culture can be appropriated for China's external communication campaigns. Such entanglement of individual, market, and state forces is manifested and orchestrated

in her attractive, diligent, filial, and independent oriental female image—all distinctive features that speak to China's socialist values such as equality, dedication, civility, harmony, prosperity, integrity, and friendship, 'make' Li resonate with Western audiences. Li Ziqi rose to prominence long before she was endorsed by the state-owned legacy media and the state, completing the spreadable media cycle as outlined by Jenkins (2013) and demonstrated by Smith (2014). It is because her persona and brand fit nicely with the state's official plan of establishing a favorable image of China and its efforts to bridge the poverty gap between rural and urban life both locally and, perhaps more crucially, globally, thereby extending China's cultural soft power internationally. Her carefully crafted Chineseness symbolizes a distinct and local brand in the YouTube techno-cultural landscape that elevates the everyday ordinary to the extraordinary and, as a result, has a broad appeal globally.

#### Abbreviations

MCN	Multi-channel network
UGC	User-generated content
PGC	Professional-generated content
CCTV	China central television

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#### Author contributions

The corresponding author initiated this project, conducted initial literature review, and brainstormed possible conceptual framework for analysis with the other two co-authors. The first author further developed the theoretical framework and completed the first draft. All three authors contributed to the data analysis sections and offered a conclusion. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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#### Availability of data and materials

Not applicable. However, all videos of Li Ziqi are available on YouTube via <https://www.youtube.com/c/cnliziqi>

#### Declarations

##### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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