Manufacturing and commodifying "Chineseness": a food-vlogger Li Ziqi and her media representation on YouTube

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Abstract

With the proliferation of cultural and creative industries in China, the 'Internet plus' economy has turned millions of Chinese young people into entrepreneurial and digital prosumers – consumers and producers. In tandem, multi-channel network (MCN) has become a new business model to scout, train, package and promote online micro-celebrities into 'natural and authentic' spokespersons for self-branded products and services, who also play an important role in shaping national and cultural identities. Amid the emergent convergence of e-commerce and social commerce, one of the most influential food-vloggers and YouTube celebrities, Li Ziqi attracted unprecedented fame online, home and abroad. This chapter focuses on Li's digital media work and discourses to understand how "Chineseness" is manufactured and commodified. Informed by celebrity studies, this chapter will critically assess the stories told and the images created by Li Ziqi on YouTube to an international audience. More specifically, using Lévi-Strauss' concept of 'mytheme', we argue that in order to build a positive image of China overseas Li's auto-stereotyping and (self-)orientalist portrayal of rural China has created a myth of Chineseness by (re)constructing a 'fantasy' and 'desirable mythology' of an idyllic rural China. The findings of this chapter contribute to the ongoing scholarly discussions on how China engages with the globalised world through cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: Li Ziqi, influencer, vlogger, cultural diplomacy, cultural soft power, Chineseness, celebrity studies

Introduction

With the proliferation and development of cultural and creative industries in China, the 'Internet plus' economy has turned millions of Chinese young people into digital prosumers. As argued elsewhere (Chen 2021), prosumers, literally consumers and producers, as key players of the Chinese digital economy, have demonstrated a strong entrepreneurial endowment of Chinese online celebrities. Among the tech giants, Baidu, Tencent and Alibaba, together known as BAT have attracted global attention in the tech and financial industries, as well as in academia, where media managers, business consultants, and scholars

start to ponder on why these tech giants succeed and what this means for the world, economically, socially and politically. Cross-border collaborations between China's mainland and Hong Kong, as well as Australia for example, has secured an Australian Research Council (ARC) fund to study the implications of the rise of Chinese tech giants following China's ascent on the world stage (Keane & Fung, 2018). Under such a backdrop, "Chinese tech giants telling Chinese stories to the world" as a nationally orchestrated campaign has also refashioned itself over the past decade, especially from a top-down approach, to investigating the processes and effects of these public and cultural diplomacy endeavours (Thussu et al., 2018). According to Ang et.al. (2015), "cultural diplomacy is a governmental practice that operates in the name of a clearly defined ethos of national or local representation, in a space where nationalism and internationalism merge" (367). Case studies on China's cultural diplomacy include China's state-owned legacy media, cinema, cultural institutions like Confucius Institutes, and events, where these scholars argue soft power is ever more important in international and political communications (Thussu et al., 2018; Becard and Filho, 2019). Scholars have also begun to note that in China the term "cultural soft power" is slowly replacing the terms "soft power" and "cultural diplomacy" (Becard and Filho, 2019). This is because "culture" is integral to China's soft power as seen in the frequent use of the term "cultural soft power" in state rhetoric on reforming its cultural system, promoting socialist core values, and pushing forward the cultural industry (Ibid, 2019). The state's use of culture is therefore an "instrument of power….which has more control over the narratives that will be disseminated abroad, and will decide what goes into the country" (Ibid, 2019: 4). However, there is scant research on how Chinese digital creators are part of China's cultural diplomacy efforts, or in other words how these digital creators present China and narrate Chinese stories from a bottom-up approach to people overseas, with few recent exceptions (Ewen, 2021). We aim to join the ongoing debate and scholarly interest in China's "cultural soft power" by looking at how Li Ziqi is contributing to China's cultural diplomacy efforts. Li is a food-vlogger and online celebrity, who has become a household name domestically and generates considerable impact internationally with a huge fan base on YouTube. Her more than 15 million subscribers help her break the Guinness World Record for most subscribers for a Chinese language channel on YouTube (Wang, 2021).

Informed by celebrity studies, this chapter will examine Li's digital repertoire and persona from a production perspective, delineate her strategies that have helped contribute to China's "cultural soft power" overseas by catering to international audiences, and assess the implications of grassroots digital creators in cultural diplomacy and cross-cultural communication in a digital age. We argue that Li and her videos are largely fuelling a (self-)orientalist depiction of rural China, in particular, an idyllic and mysterious rural Chinese culture, and soft and feminine rural Chineseness, both packaged and captured by

a capitalist and consumerist logic. These are essentially performed on the surface but reality also exists at the center – a deeply rooted independent countryside woman with an arduous upbringing. The nostalgia and yearning towards a rural lifestyle that Li creates in her videos, however, have (re)constructed a 'fantasy' and 'desirable mythology' – the fabulous image of a rural Chineseness – with a set of repetitive and self-directed mythemes about 'Chineseness'. Such Chineseness understood by the West is an 'other' in the sense of a characteristic orientalist depiction of an idyllic rural China. This chapter will first start with a brief literature review and contextualise the case of Li Ziqi in terms of digital media production and the media effects her persona and work generated. It will then briefly go through the methodologies employed. The analysis section will examine those strategies and images that are created and endorsed in Li's vlogs, which have helped promote China's national image and "cultural soft power" overseas, to be followed by a conclusion.

Digital creators create (for) a nation

Research on digital creators, influencers and micro-celebrities is booming in the developed West and a developing Asia (Abidin, 2018). Research in this area forms several strands of thought. Some have focused on how digital platforms empower users to express themselves and create a participatory culture with their collective intelligence (Jenkins, 2006) and entrepreneurial endeavours (Cunningham and Craig, 2019). Some groups would advance a political agenda in the public sphere (celebrity politicians) (Street, 2012; Wheeler, 2013), while others find and create their private spheres and blur the boundaries between the public and the private (Papacharissi, 2011). Cunningham and Craig (2016) warned the Western world that a digital China with its scale and diversity cannot be neglected economically or politically, even when social media entertainment is taking the lead in the country. 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 (see Abidin, 2018). These micro-celebrities are 'natural and authentic' spokespersons for commerce and self-branded products and services (Gardner & Lehnert, 2016), who start their career as content creators on social media platforms and their primary strategy is to commodify and make themselves a brand (Abidin, 2018). Initially, as a non-commercial endeavour, the UGC (user-generated content) gradually becomes PGC (professional-generated content) and converged with the booming social media platforms (Chen, 2021), such as The Little Red Book (Xiaohong shu 小红书), TikTok, Weibo, WeChat, Bilibili, as well as international platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. We see an emergence and convergence of e-commerce and s-commerce (social commerce), where e-commerce platforms are aiming to monetize users' sociality, while social media platforms are transforming

themselves into social-selling of commodities (Chen & Cheung, 2020), including online celebrities themselves (Smith, 2014).

This chapter started from such a scholarly interest and aims to link the political, the economic and the social in order to understand if digital creators like Li Ziqi *create* a national image and/or *create for* a nation that they are part of. In a Chinese context, it is hard to separate the two and it would be surprising and uninformed to do so. This needs some explanation. Li initially only created for a domestic audience and the presence on YouTube has become part of the MCN promotion while the platform continues to be banned in China's mainland (Matei, 2020). The reason why Li has become the cultural ambassador of and for China and has been endorsed by the state TV in their broadcasting of Li on CCTV, is largely because of the media impact she generated at home and more importantly, abroad (Jung, 2019). It is definitely a case worthy of careful examination in terms of the images created, the strategies adopted and the impact generated.

Existing and recent research about the "Li Ziqi phenomenon" focuses on her production value, her business strategies, and her mixed reception by a Chinese audience (Chen, 2020b; Xu, 2020). Few studies focus on her international communication significance with some exceptions using a cross-cultural perspective (Ji, 2020). In-depth media analyses have also been done by Chinese media to understand her fame abroad, arguing that she contributed to the "cultural export" of China to an international audience with several benchmarks. The Paper, a Chinese digital news leader, reported a study by Alfred Data Lab (2019), where 69,970 comments posted by 63,768 users under the top three vlogs were collected and analysed. The average playback for Li's YouTube video totals 9,670,000, which is 10 times higher than her MCN presence on Bilibili in China. The likes and dislikes on YouTube is 45:1, which shows a dominantly positive and affective following. The top 10 emoji used are likes/thumb-up, heart, applauds, moving/crying, praying, roses, to name but a few. Based on the fans' own tagging, the top 10 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 (see details in Alfred Data Lab, 2019). Critical scholars would reserve their opinion as what exactly these figures translate to is hard to measure; 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 & Bergman Rosamond, 2018; Wood et al., 2016). These politically salient endeavours never work neatly and have often backfired as existing cases show in the West, where political stance and affiliation can be explicitly declared (Kaul & Chaudhri, 2017). In China, as long as the digital repertoire are orchestrated by the mainstream discourse,

they will be widely accepted and supported (Chen, 2020a). Such a de-politicisation process is the invisible strategy that has seldom been investigated in the context of digital influencers. However, research on social media discourse has recently focused on various hegemonic discourses that are endorsed and promoted by the state, such as "positive energy" "harmonious society" (Chen et al., 2021), while "sang culture 丧文化" (meaning "mourning" in Chinese and now used to reflect the reduced work ethic, lack of self-motivation and apathetic demeanor among China's middle-class urban youth) as understood as part of the negative energy is discouraged (Tan & Cheng, 2020). This is a telling phenomenon embodied by a Korean proverb, that states "it's dark under the lamp"; literally, people tend to neglect what is under the spotlight since it is too obvious.

With this context in mind, it is a false hypothesis/proposal to investigate whether digital creators such as Li are contributing to the cultural diplomacy endeavours engineered by the state if what they created are still in line with what the state promotes and, in this case, positive associations with Chinese culture. Chinese culture here is broadly defined to include its food culture, crafts, people, landscape, plants, custom, aesthetics, and values, all of which have been featured in Li's digital repertoire. In addition, Li as a digital creator and successful entrepreneur has been incorporated and endorsed by the state in various creative ways. According to Baidupedia (2020), following her social media popularity, Li was named top 10 most popular food and cooking personalities on Sina Weibo in June 2017. She received more than ten national awards following her YouTube debut in 2018. What makes her influential in the cultural sphere includes multiple hats she wears for (semi-)governmental bodies because of her promotion endeavours of Chinese culture. These include, but are not limited to, an ambassador of Intangible Cultural Heritage for Chengdu City, the Annual Cultural Communication Personality for her efforts in communicating Chinese culture to her overseas audience, and the endorsement by the Ministry of Agriculture of PRC as one of the first cohorts of ambassadors for the Chinese famers' harvesting festival. In 2020, she was elected as a committee member for 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 the commercially-oriented social media platforms for her re-ruralised digital media work and persona construction. Evidently, state interests in promoting traditional Chinese culture both at home and abroad have increased in recent years, with notable examples also including the government's endorsement of the animation film (i.e., Nezha 2019) and their promotion in the west (Whyke, et.al, 2021). The government's endorsement of such cultural industries and figures, including Li Ziqi, has been attributed not only by their hard-to-measure charisma and soft power (Xu, 2020) as demonstrated through influential social media data, but also their economic success and social impact, demonstrated in Li's case through re-

making the rural attractive (lifestyle, food, environment, local culture and economy) for an international audience. That is, the mainstream media and her digital repertoire perhaps do not need evidence-based media effects study. What matters is that the mainstream media and her digital repertoire make people talk *about* her and study her in international communication (Xu, 2020; Ji, 2020). Therefore, she becomes a symbol and myth for 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.

Self-branding and self-commodifying

Existing literature in celebrity studies in recent years has moved from the separation of celebrities and their fans to look at the interactions (Smith, 2014) and value co-creation (Chen, 2021), especially when investigating online celebrities. Usher (2020) has rightly pointed out how celebrity should be re-conceptualised to understand the differences from the celebrities manufactured in traditional entertainment industries, where the gatekeepers play a significant role. Platforms like YouTube aim to provide access and increase the diversification of online celebrities. Smith (2014) even claims that everyone is a celebrity and also a fan. He uses the metaphor of "being God and the believer" at the same time to explain that self-branding and self-commodification on social media is self-directional (see also, Chen & Cheung, 2020). This is because online persona management is the "cultural logic" of online celebrities and allows ordinary users and consumers to become the extraordinary prosumers, professionals and celebrities (Chen, 2021).

The logic behind this is that in a consumerist environment, celebrity, as a "mask" (Alexander, 2008), is subject to change through creating not an essence but a symbolic system. In the case of Li Ziqi, although deeply entrenched in the reality of her countryside roots and growing up in poverty, we argue that she creates a Chinese mythology of sorts, sustained by a set of representations, images, and mythemes (Marshall, 2010; Smith, 2014) relating to the portrayal of traditional rural culture and soft femininity created in her vlogs. In this chapter we build our argument around Lévi-Strauss (1958, 235-6) who argued that "myth" is the reconstruction of certain imitation of the past (in this case China's rural past), in other words, a restructuring of history. Strauss accordingly stated that any set of fundamental generic units of narrative structure found in the plot of a written story (a relationship between a character, an event, and a theme) from which myths are thought to be formed crystalizes what Strauss calls a "mytheme". As outlined by Lévi-Strauss (1963), when unpacked, mythemes can "show that a certain function is, at a given time, linked to a given subject" and when the mythemes are related and combined, they create meaning (Lévi-Strauss 1963, p. 211). When put in the online celebrity context, the *mythemes* are part and parcel of the self-branding and self-commodification process, which allow digital creators to sustain their

fame and stardom through manufactured intimacy and authenticity (Raun, 2018). There is a distinction between fame and celebrity (in its traditional sense). Fame is accumulative and can be achieved, and is now increasingly measured by algorithmic platform architecture in the forms of likes, hashtags, labels, and reposts (Smith, 2014). While a celebrity in a traditional sense would have to go through the gatekeepers while on the digital and social media platforms, online (micro-)celebrities can garner considerable attention which they can transform into economic and cultural capitals to create and sustain their own stardom (Chen, 2020a). These new conceptualisations are important in understanding the strategies employed by online celebrities like Li Ziqi to develop their own vernacular culture with a significant and loyal fan base (Burgess & Green, 2009). This is based on the premise that online celebrities do not have to be a well-rounded celebrity for a mass audience. Online celebrities could be strategic, selective and calculative in making their own creative choices in terms of production and promotion. Therefore, they can keep creating and reinforcing well-tested mythemes that are sustained via timeless interactions (Smith, 2014) and perform authenticity. New fans can always come in at any time they feel like it if they find the images and mythemes attractive and appealing to them. With such a conceptualisation in mind, the next section will explain the fame of Li Ziqi and the methodologies to be employed to study the strategies and mythemes used by her, followed by the analysis.

Li Ziqi on YouTube: authentic and performed Chineseness
Li was originally born and brought up in rural Sichuan in the Southwest of China. Li's parents divorced when she was young, and her father died young when she was only six. The whereabouts of Li's mother are unknown as she never speaks about her, but it is known that Li's stepmother did not treat her well, so her grandparents took her back to the countryside. Her grandfather worked as a local cook, was good at farming, and knew how to weave. Li was fascinated by her grandfather's work in the countryside. Sadly however, in the fifth grade of elementary school, her grandfather passed away, and her grandmother raised her until she was fourteen and it was no longer financially sustainable. Li failed to get a proper education, dropping out of school at fourteen and working in poor conditions with little pay such as a DJ where sexism was the daily reality of her then everyday life. She had struggled to earn money from doing various precarious jobs in many cities in China undergoing significant economic transformations. In 2012, her grandmother fell ill. Li chose to return to the countryside to take care of her grandmother and sell clothes in an online Taobao shop, but the business was poor. Afterwards, Li learned the fundamentals of video editing from her older brother who would post guitar vlogs on the social media platform Meipai. She later worked with video apps on her mobile phone, purchased a tripod camera and began shooting videos and editing them, primarily focusing on herself and her grandmother, until the work became popular on Meipai (Tee, 2021).

Today, Li Ziqi and her rural roots have made her one of the most representative cases of Chinese YouTubers known to both domestic and international audiences. Her persona and fame are underpinned by a central theme of rural China, including its food culture. A mixed reception on China's largest self-media portal, WeChat, has attributed her work as a successful 'cultural diplomacy' and 'cultural exporting' endeavour which generates cultural power (Keane & Fung, 2018) so as to legitimise her business and counter the criticisms raised by her anti-fans (Wang, 2018), i.e., those who disparage Chinese personal content creators like Li Ziqi, who 'sell out' to the West or represent 'inauthentic' portrayals of China – for not authentically representing Chinese rural life since it fits too well with an 'othered' view of China. By 'othered' here, we mean for instance the 'questionable' 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. This illustrates well the fact that a copyrighted patriotism and exquisitely packaged 'soft China' reflects the divided and converged (thus paradoxical) stances on the patriarchal patriotism and misogyny on Chinese social media. However, it is these very depictions of a gentle and serene Chinese village life that has gained praise among many foreign viewers, which will likewise help grow China's *cultural* soft power (Yu, 2020, our emphasis). Although there are of course some foreign viewers and media who may decline to admit this also, considering that "only popular cultural products made by countries it deems not a threat represent soft power" (Yu, 2020). The *moe* (cute and budding) and no-harm persona is the new currency in stimulating affects and attracting audiences from different cultural backgrounds (Chen, 2021). Within this manufactured rural Chineseness, there is also an international and global aspect to it, as Iwabuchi (2015) calls transnationalism when analysing the reason why Japanese and Korean popular culture products achieve a significant global following (Iwabuchi, 2002). These themes will be further analysed with the methodologies proposed below.

Studying strategies, texts and meanings of online celebrities
We will take a mixed-method approach, using textual analysis and digital ethnography. Since Li and her vlogs (understood here as both products and texts) are the central focus of this study, her works will be analysed textually according to the representations, images, and mythemes relating to Li's fabulous and serene depiction of traditional rural Chineseness, and soft and feminine rural Chineseness. Finally we will draw upon these to discuss Li as a well-selling brand. An ethnographical approach is also necessary, where her digital repertoire hosted via MCNs, and in particular YouTube, is analysed. We primarily draw upon on her recent "life of a plant" series/playlists following 2020, after she was endorsed by the state-owned media and became a national cultural ambassador (Wang, 2021). In total, there are 22 videos, with

each focusing on one plant (tomatoes, rice, garlic, persimmons) and their life course, including being preserved and cooked in various creative ways (see Table 1). These ingredients are skilfully cooked, while the whole process aesthetically presented (shot, edited and post-produced) through documentary-like vlogs. Each vlog lasts around 20-30 minutes.

Subscribers on YouTube	15,300,000
Number of videos	125
Playlists	11
Videos after 2020	22
Viewership after 2020	486,870,000
Videos in Life series	17
Viewership of Life series	425,460,000
Life series video percentage	77%
Life series viewership percentage	87%

Table 1. Facts and statistics of Li Ziqi from YouTube (Source: Authors, up until July 2021)

Performed authenticity: idyllic and mysterious rural Chinese culture
At the surface level, Li's fame is understood as an underdog story that celebrates the agency not just of aspirational women but also rural women in China. The long and close-up shots of her remarkably adroit farming and cooking scenes have helped create a desirable personality that works for marketing purposes. By and large, these videos work as marketing collaterals in that they help Li to promote her online brand (the Li Ziqi shop) that covers a well-established production line of agricultural and subsidiary products, such as packaged food, kitchenware (hand-forged kitchen knife chopper, wooden chopsticks, Chinese ice-stone teacups), handicrafts (jewelry), and even Chinese traditional clothing (hanfu, 汉服), shoes and bags. In other videos Li also introduces the production of paper and inkstones, the production of various foods for the autumn and winter seasons, the production of spring flower banquets, and in fact the production of everything from soybeans to traditional soy sauce. This has also, however, been one of the major criticisms from many people online, who questioned that she was 'packaged'. Within the vlog representations of Li, there is a significant number of B-roll footage where the camera follows her from different angles and perspectives. The use of medium shots capture her movement in an idyllic and fairy-tale-like countryside, where she moves between green forests, with branches, grass and flowers blocking certain portions of the screen. This is different from other YouTube celebrities examined by earlier

research (Smith, 2014), who are 'ordinary people being extraordinary through doing daily routines', creating an authenticity that is relatable to the viewers. However, her approach and strategy, as demonstrated through the shots used in her vlogs, is different in the sense that her routines are always visually pleasing for the viewer, 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. For example, in one video Li demonstrates to the audience the traditional Chinese method of how to turn soybean seeds into soy sauce, as she collects the beans from the green fields, cleans them and picks out the stones. This all occurs against the backdrop of a beautiful red hue in the sky from sunrise to sunset in the Sichuan countryside, as Li uses the clean natural water 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 an exquisite glistening dark layer the next day.The poetic and dreamy lifestyle is ordinary as it is set in everyday rural settings, but extraordinary since she can afford the time and has the skills to effortlessly turn the gift from mother nature into delicious and visually appealing food. In other videos she can be seen nurturing a plant, wandering in the woods full of bamboo, or chitchatting with her neighbours and grandmother (inaudible most of the time in a Sichuan dialect).

One must also recognize, however, that there is 'truth' behind Li's 'performed Chineseness', a truth which goes beyond the presentation of exquisite and beautiful rural objects and the visual presentation level of her videos, which are obviously beyond the reach of a rookie videographer and vlogger. First of all, her work is real. She is proficient in many crafts from the agricultural era, showing us a part of the relationship between humanity and nature, the relationship between work and aesthetics, and the intangible rural cultural relics with Sichuan regional characteristics that have existed for a long time in Chinese history and continue to exist in some rural areas. Second, the relationship between Li and her grandmother is real. There is no hypocritical language, no 'theatrical' performance, and the two only work quietly with very limited dialect dialogue. Supplemented by her life story that we have outlined previously, people believe in her with the knowledge that she abandoned her life in the city and returned to the countryside to look after her grandmother. Third, in terms of Li's rural crafts, the aesthetic effect of an idyllic Chinese style has been established and highlighted, enabling people to enjoy a contemporary online expression of the beauty of traditional or even 'mysterious' Chinese culture and art in the digital era.

A soft (but also strong) feminine rural Chineseness

Beyond the real rural woman and her chaotic past that exists behind the aesthetic values demonstrated through the traditional rural culture in her vlogs, there is also the performed soft and feminine rural Chineseness Li chooses as part of the production value of her digital repertoire. In particular, the sophisticated and resourceful women of two generations (Li and her grandmother) sticking together and backing each other up creates a unique image of resilient Chinese women left behind in the rural areas across China. China's transforming economy has indeed 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 are either left behind or feel the need to return to rural areas (Mu and Walle, 2011; Fan and Chen, 2020). As a result of other migrating members of the household, many left-behind rural women have to 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). As mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, Li Ziqi certainly has a real arduous story about her past residing under her soft and feminine rural Chineseness in her vlogs, and this is also one characteristic of Li's vlogs that is seldom recognized or understood.

The uniqueness of such a sophisticated women image is twofold: "soft women" on the outside and "strong and resilient women" on the inside. The softness is most evident to the vlog viewer however, constructed by the presentation of Li Ziqi as a slim and beautiful youthful woman labouring in the fields and around a rural, dim, and old-style cooking bench. This is also supported by her often self-made outfits with Chinese features in her vlogs, well-orchestrated by modern cutting techniques and aesthetics to allow her to move easily while at work without losing the visual appeal. Her grandmother often acts as a silent assistant attending the kitchen fire, while at other times is just affectionately watching her skilful cooking and crafting.

The soft or softened side of this aspirational "rural woman" image has been constructed via a series of mythemes that recreates themselves via constant vlog production like perpetuating simulacra. First, there are no male figures represented in videos made by Li. The protagonist represented in Li's videos is herself, a petite woman of 5 feet tall. In addition, her elderly but sprightly grandmother is featured in almost each video, among the finishing lines of the videos, where Li presents the handicraft or home-cooked food. No male figures are portrayed in the scenes, which suggests they are not needed to perform

the traditionally perceived macho and physical labour, such as when Li is carrying newly harvested corn and rice, making bamboo beds and fences, driving tractors and milking.

Second, such representation of Chinese women is new in the sense that it not only fills the gap of men (in the form of lacking and non-existent), but also fills the gap of women in hard-core agricultural labour. That is to say, when men are absent from the aforementioned labor, Li fills the gap as a woman and has a strong presence. This coincides with the worrying and harsh reality mentioned above, whereby Chinese (married) women are indeed in the field, labouring in the wild and rural China when men are 'outside' in the city as migrant workers (Mu and Walle, 2006; Fan and Chen, 2020). 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 labours in well-decorated homes dominates Chinese screens. As for Li Ziqi, she only needs to create more sequences featuring these mythemes in this series and sustain her image and brand. She will continue to use 'masculine' labour and 'feminine' beauty to persuade her viewers of her authenticity, whilst all the time paradoxically drawing on the persistent courage that her past life has given her to persuade her audience that she is not fabricated. Whether it is Li's intrinsic ingenuity or independence, such characteristics can also echo the expectations of Western discourse for strong female images.

Conclusion

This chapter has conducted a case study of the online celebrity and influencer Li Ziqi, her fame and brand on YouTube. Using a mixed method and ethnographical approach, we have demonstrated what strategies are used by Li Ziqi to make her digital repertoire and herself a brand which creates and maintains a Chinese mythology. However, what matters is not it is the Chineseness per se that makes her successful and appealing. The meaning-making processes are powered by the mythemes, the spreadability of the media and the cultural logic of online celebrities. Li's digital media work, like many other similar online celebrities, functions as therapeutic symbolic text, which has the potential to dissolve anxieties caused by the unfinished project of modernity at home and abroad. These online celebrities have managed to find their niche and (re-)create their own brands targeting a specific audience. As demonstrated from this case study, Li Ziqi established her fame way before she was endorsed by the state-owned legacy media and the state, a necessary step to complete the spreadable media cycle as defined by Jenkins (2013) and demonstrated by Smith (2014). This is because her brand fits in well with the national strategy of constructing a positive image of China locally, but perhaps more importantly globally, subsequently spreading China's cultural soft power overseas. Such a manufactured Chineseness is not a fixed identity that can be replicated across difference media formats and platforms as propagandist message, but a

flexible mythology that calls for self-directing and spreadable mythemes to be created and re-created following the cultural logic as in MCN. The takeaway point from Li Ziqi's case, therefore, is that it represents an individual and local brand situated and sustained in the techno-cultural landscape of MCN that turns the everyday ordinariness into the unique and the extraordinary which has a global appeal.

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