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## Li Ziqi and the Possibility of Critical Optimism

By Martin Essemann

### Abstract

This essay explores the work of the Chinese content creator Li Ziqi, and the different ways one might approach such media. Li's YouTube videos of idealised rural life, categorised here as an example of the *CottageCore* genre, made her one of the most popular Chinese cultural creators to audiences outside of China in the last decade. In analysing her work, this essay conceives of content creation as an extended performance building up a relationship with the audience. The author argues that a close reading of the affective/ideological attachments inspired by Li's work is needed, which considers the political context of globalising media platforms and changing cultural hegemony, but does not present her popularity as the result of an unreflective/naïve audience acted upon by this context: rather, the author insists on the agency and possibility of criticality among online audiences, despite their necessarily compromised position in the middle of an oppressive global system. By extension, making space for criticality and performativity in interpretations of contemporary online cultures becomes a requisite for understanding public reactions to the recent correlated forms of global economic, climate and health crises.

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## Li Ziqi and the Possibility of Critical Optimism

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How am I to make sense of the fact that one of the most internationally successful cultural phenomena to emerge from China in recent years is an, apparently, relatively independent *YouTube* channel run by a young woman, focused on depicting an idealised version of her life in Sichuan? For all its hyper-artificial, nostalgic prettiness and therapeutic elements, this case could be easily dismissed along with so many other forms of popular culture deemed an illusion “that conceals the material conditions upon which all human works rise, and that, comforting and lulling, [...] serves to keep alive the bad economic determination of existence” (Adorno 47) — the trap of oversimplified political materialism that Adorno was already warning us of in 1951, which sets up a false duality between illusory aesthetic culture and *real material conditions* as if the latter were not also epistemically contingent. This text seeks to disentangle the various arguments that underpin this form of dismissal, focusing on the case of one particular content creator, Li Ziqi, and paying special attention to the way performative aspects of online content and persona creation, and the forms of audience relation this invites — alongside considerations of the political context these arise in. The broader function is to promote the study of similar forms of culture that might easily be dismissed as frivolous, escapist or utopian — for the way it engages audiences from within the gendered and racial hierarchies of global cultural flows. The text argues that this form of media carries essential information about affective responses to climate anxiety, global capitalism and the recent pandemic.

In 2021, the *Guinness World Records* included an entry on 李子柒 *Liziqi*, the *YouTube* channel connected to the content creator Li Ziqi

(1990-), under the title “Most subscribers for a Chinese language channel on YouTube” — a not particularly exhilarating record of the digital age. It was significant for the fact that *YouTube*, along with many other websites, remains inaccessible from behind the Great Firewall of the People’s Republic of China, and the wording of the record was a curious choice given the fact that Li’s videos are mostly wordless. It was a year into the various international attempts at containing the spread of the Coronavirus and for the populations living under different forms of movement restriction and curfew this brought with it an increase in online media consumption (Lemenager, Tagrid et al.). Videos had been uploaded to Li Ziqi’s channel since 2017 with a frequency of a couple of weeks — most of the videos around 5 minutes long.

The videos usually focus on some form of craft or a particular foodstuff, leading the *Guinness World Records* website to describe her as a ‘food and country-life blogger,’ but they are remarkable for the fact that they are not really educational or instructive: we see Li cook, craft and farm but she does not pause to explain — behaving almost as if she were unaware of the camera. The videos are set somewhere in the misty mountains of Sichuan, inside a paradisaical walled garden where Li lives alongside her grandmother in a beautiful old house. It is difficult to give a faithful description of Li’s videos without lapsing into verbal immoderation. The videos are building upon an aesthetic language of simulated domestic bliss of lifestyle blogs and romance novels, but the added element that propelled Li to global popularity is perhaps her cinematographic capacity to engage more than just the visual and social sense of the viewer. To imbue her videos with an awareness of scent, sound and texture that makes their content so much more affective Li incorporates elongated montage sequences of seasonally changing landscapes, dimly lit domestic scenes and close-up shots of dewy vegetables in the morning sun.



Screen Captures from "So... it goes like... the life of peas"  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOvJ9Tg\\_rp4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOvJ9Tg_rp4)

Aside from the cinematographic quality and idealised setting, there are a couple of other details to note for anyone unfamiliar with Li's work: in her videos, she appears to produce or harvest almost everything she uses: in a particularly process-focused video about a dressing made from salt-cured duck eggs, the video begins with her enlisting the help of a chicken to hatch some ducklings, that she then rears in order to later use their eggs to cook with (“蛋黄酱：起沙滋油，咸鲜酥软How to make Salted Duck Egg Yolk Sauce (Chinese Mayonnaise) |Liziqi Channel”). The authenticity of this process is of course not clear, but my point is that the hyperbole of such a farm-to-table narrative is enough to transport it into the realm of fantasy either way. Secondly, is her apparently inexhaustible dexterity and knowledge: we see her engage in a wide range of traditional cooking and farming techniques from tilling the soil by hand and harvesting with a sickle, to noodle and winemaking; she weaves cloth, carves a wooden printing press, processes, and constructs furniture and tools out of bamboo; and she forages for a wide range of wild plants and mushrooms. Though each of these skills might on their own have the air of hobby projects, together they give the impression of a nostalgic self-sufficiency that is reminiscent of a kind of pastoral romanticism.

With 16.7 million current subscribers, her *YouTube* channel is a considerable presence on the platform, which is all the more surprising considering the timing — as reports indicate a significant increase in racist hate crimes against people deemed Asian in the midst of the pandemic (Gray and Hansen). Indeed, her success has been so marked that it has produced a number of similar Chinese content creators on *YouTube*, mostly young women — apart from a single channel which is more specifically

focused on handicraft.<sup>1</sup> In spite of — or perhaps because of — this success, her *YouTube* channel has not seen any new videos since July 14, 2021. She has been involved in a lengthy legal dispute over the rights to her name and brand with a talent agency affiliated with the tech conglomerate Tencent. Remarkably, she reached a favourable settlement in late 2022, and thus it looks possible that her work will continue (Kong). The outcome of this legal dispute is but one indication of the official support for her work.<sup>2</sup> On October 24, 2021, during the proceedings, she appeared in a long and intimate interview on *CCTV* (“如何看待自己走红？未来有何规划？李子柒这样说 20211022 | 《鲁健访谈》CCTV中文国际”), one of the leading Chinese public broadcasters, where she spoke about her hopes for the future. And in recent years, she has received several Chinese awards and honours (Zhang).

This politicisation of Li’s work public persona will be the topic of the following section. I will discuss how her work is racialised and gendered, and how understanding this context allows for understanding the features of her work as not just aesthetic choices, but as performative political decisions from within a position of constraint. The final section expands this focus to her audience and the genre of related online content described by the term *CottageCore*, to ask what kind of interpretation becomes possible when looking beyond simple accusations of naïvety.

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<sup>1</sup> For a look at the most popular YouTube channels of this kind, look up the handles: [Dian Xi Xiao Ge] “滇西小哥 Dianxi Xiaoge - YouTube”; [Lao Tai A Rui] “老太阿蕊 Laotai Arui - YouTube”; [Long Mei Mei] “龙梅梅 Longmeimei - YouTube”; and [Wo Men De Xiao Xi] “我们的小喜 XiaoXi’s Culinary Idyll - YouTube.”

<sup>2</sup> I am not suggesting that the outcome of the lawsuit was officially orchestrated, but rather that it reveals an awareness of her cultural/political influence on the part of the talent agency.

## SOFT POWER

There is something insidious about the sound of this term. Already in 1991, Ernesto Laclau warned against drawing a distinction between violence and persuasion — not because the differences of degree are insignificant, but because it makes it appear as if violence is excluded from a situation when it is sustained only in the form of a latent threat or a promise of pleasure (Laclau), as if the detrimental effects of force can be ameliorated if only its methods are *softened* enough. But Laclau's point was not to suggest that persuasive techniques themselves were somehow ethically compromised because they did not act out violence directly. In discussions of Li Ziqi as an agent of *soft power* for the Chinese State this distinction is used to present any form of culture not directly involved in illuminating or denouncing the violence carried out by the State as propaganda or subterfuge: according to *Radio Free Asia (RFA)*, a right-wing media platform funded by the US Congress, her videos “struck exactly the right note for the CCP, because they avoided any mention of politics and focused only on showing the beauty of her part of China” (Hsiao-hwa). To *RFA*, this *avoidance of politics* is not obvious to the general audience, who seemingly lack the critical capacities to make such distinctions — if it were, there would be no need to denounce it.

There is no question that Li's videos can help promote a positive conversation about certain aspects of Chinese culture — as has been openly acknowledged by her promotion on official State channels — but such a questioning of the audience's critical abilities is not likely to bring us much closer to understanding why this is. As an article from *South China Morning Post* asserts, she “does [a] better job of promoting China than [any] Confucius Institute” (Yan). Which is to say that the Chinese State has engaged in cultural promotional activities for decades, precisely with a strategy of avoiding any contentious topic. In an article about Li in *the*

*Guardian*, Professor Ka-Ming Wu, a cultural anthropologist at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, throws doubt on the idea that Li is operating under direct instruction from the Communist Party, by arguing that her narrative of pastoral romanticism “hinges on her failure to thrive in the city; that failure is antithetical to China’s overarching narrative of progress and urban opportunity ... One of her major successes is that she’s making that failure highly aesthetic ... However, the Chinese government is very smart to appropriate her work and say that she represents traditional culture and promote her.”

The question of exactly how Li’s work fits in with the political strategy of the Chinese State is in any case beyond the scope of this text, although it would be interesting to involve the media produced by her and similar content creators in recent discussions about the role of nostalgia in contemporary Chinese culture.<sup>3</sup> From my limited perspective as a member of an international audience, I feel more qualified to make judgements from my own position of engagement.

But the inclusion of the theme of failure here interests me: aestheticized rural life not as a defiant resistance to inhumane hyper-productivity, but as an admission of personal failure. In Li’s case, it is part of the rather fairy story-esque biography floating around in various formats online: after the divorce of her parents and death of her father, she was left in the care of her grandparents, whose home she left at 14 to try and earn money in the city where “she starved, slept in a cave under a bridge, worked as a waitress, an electrician, and she even worked as a DJ at a nightclub,” until eventually moving back home to her grandmother and embracing the rural life (“Li Ziqi Biography”). The function of this failure is seemingly

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<sup>3</sup> For a look at the role of nostalgia in shaping rural tourism initiatives see Qian (2017). See Gao (2013) for a rather different idea of nostalgia as resistance.



intended to excuse and soften the experience so that the audience is not repelled by the intensity of the aesthetic display.

Defining this failure is also pertinent when considering the role of gender in Li's work. I could criticise her for, just like so many other narratives, centring feminised domesticity as refuge. But to do so risks repeating the false dichotomy between housework and *real* work, that sees the former as necessarily devalued and unskilled. She certainly does not fail at performing feminised domestic labour — but does the readiness to see such proficiency as a feminist failure not simply reduce the agency for feminist resistance?

There is a potential for two opposing interpretations of gender performance in Li's videos: they are virtually devoid of the presence of men, which both removes her from a strictly sexual position of femininity, and further reaffirms her feminine innocence, similar to a Victorian *angel in the house*. The relationship between Li and her grandmother is of central interest to many of the people commenting on *YouTube* (“(EP2) The life of blue calico dresses hand-dyed by Li Ziqi? 蓝草的一生？蓝印花布的一生？还是李子柒花裙子的一生？ | Liziqi Channel”): a relation which is undoubtedly traditional, but not strictly filial or patriarchal. Is this idealised rural femininity a result of nostalgic conservatism or a reflection of the fact that this is still the only available subject position for a young woman engaged in the type of practices that Li has made her brand?

[suggest image insert 3]

I might assume a causal relation between capitalist failure and traditional gender performance, and thus forgive or even admire Li's socially conservative performance so long as it is bound up in an overarching narrative of capitalist refusal. If I were to argue against such a negative reading and promote the idea that such feminised pleasures need not only

be the recourse for lack of better options, it would be easy to make this appear not as an extension of capitalist critique but as a promotion of the conservative gender performances presumed by such interpretation. Faced with this restriction of agency and little potential for being seen as successful as well as ethical, she has to locate the failure somewhere, and instead of positioning herself as a lovably failed young woman, she is a failed capitalist subject.

Race and orientalism cannot be excluded from considerations of Li's popularity. A techno-optimistic stance toward global social media platforms like *YouTube* imbues them with the potential to bring people together across geographical divides, but recent worries over fake-news and conspiracy theories make unbounded optimism difficult to maintain. Still it is impressive to consider the breadth of people present among her international viewers, capturing both admiration from US citizens dreaming about a simpler life to South East Asian millennials seeing an idealised and nostalgic depiction of village life rarely depicted in international media.<sup>4</sup> One reason Li manages to be seen as a *girl in a village with her grandmother* rather than a *Chinese girl in a Chinese village etc.* is perhaps that her content creation career began on Chinese social media (see for example her Weibo account in the reference list), aimed at a local audience

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<sup>4</sup> Three selected comments from the aforementioned video - many more examples can be found: 'i'm from southeast asia and i agree with your comment. I don't understand why ppl claim that village life which was shown in lizi's video is fake/exaggerated, maybe they never go to countryside or they never go outside at all. They think that girl wouldn't do rough job like liziqi, but in reality even children from countryside can do farm and catching fish with bare hands' Greta, 2021, comments on "(EP2) The life of blue calico dresses hand-dyed by Li Ziqi? 蓝草的一生? 蓝印花布的一生? 还是李子柒花裙子的一生? | Liziqi Channel."

'I am in love with this woman's creativity and the love she puts into everything she does! Love from Virginia, USA.' Jacqui Davis, 2021, *ibid*.

'Me my mom and grandma are watching this every night. Thankyou for giving us something beautiful to bond over. Love from Hyderabad, India [heart]' Brida thomus 2021, *ibid*.

among whom Li represents the ethnic majority — whose authority of tradition she was able to rely on to establish her online presence. A particularly good example to contrast with this is another person who became a local Chinese internet sensation in 2020: Tenzin, whose name was restyled in Mandarin media as Ding Zhen, became famous overnight after a video was posted of him to Chinese social media. The ‘innocent smile’ of this Tibetan cowherd, living in the same province as Li, earned him a job as a cultural ambassador and tourism promoter for his village and ethnic minority group (“Smile of the Plateau makes Ding Zhen new icon of Sichuan and Tibet”). In such a context, Li’s videos represent a fantasy of *neutral* Han cultural tradition from which the curious and exotic can be differentiated.

The historicist aesthetic of her videos, because the historicism does not refer to a recognisable nationalist tradition to her international viewers, is not coded with the same ideological meanings as the videos produced by content creators from Europe and the US, where the connotations of certain forms of historical dress might in many countries tie them to right-wing histories.<sup>5</sup> The idea of cultural translation, which was expanded upon brilliantly in a book on the rising international popularity of Korean pop culture by Sun Jung, is perhaps useful for thinking about how certain traditions can become exportable and universalised. Jung argues that it is the particular cultural hybridity — due partly to Korea’s history as occupied territory under varying colonial powers — that allowed Korean culture to translate so well across both East and South East Asia. It is worth considering if Li’s position translates so well to a Western audience because she takes a local cultural hegemony for granted?

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<sup>5</sup> See for example the *YouTube* channel “Hand & Harvest - YouTube,” where the mix of US culinary culture, historical dress and Bible citations would certainly be enough to make some people uneasy.

My choice in analysing a Chinese content creator was partly motivated by the realisation that the global media landscape of the 21st century is no longer as singularly oriented towards a US hegemony, and that the concept of whiteness consequently might be too narrow to handle the aesthetics of good intentions that continue to proliferate.<sup>6</sup> Li is of course pale skinned, tall and skinny, but it might be precisely the fact that she is not white that allows for a type of identification that deliberately seeks to move beyond the racial hierarchies of the present (a fantasy that an outside to these hierarchies exists somewhere far from the reach of the Western cultural sphere, ie. orientalism), even when the object of admiration comes very close to inhabiting the same ethnic and cultural majority position in her own context — not to mention that Li can represent a form of cultural adjacency to whiteness that might be aspirational to the parts of her audience that are not white.

It is tempting to see Li as an example of a displacement of cultural capital from the West to China, where the particular universal of nostalgic pastoralism — in a long history of European universalisms — takes the form of a Chinese woman. But then it has to be asked why content creators making similar videos from other countries outside of Western/Northern Europe and the US don't appear to be able to garner as large and varied an audience.<sup>7</sup> Is this simply a result of Li's technical prowess and specific situation, or does it reflect something more structural about the global status of Han Chinese culture at this moment? Although I will not be able to

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<sup>6</sup> For further engagement with intentionality, morality and aesthetics please refer to Essemann, Martin. *Sweet Gestures: Rethinking Good Intentions in Critical Theory through the Concept of Sweetness*. University of Amsterdam, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> There are other *YouTube* channels pursuing similar strategies — in South East Asia and Central Europe — but they do not have nearly the same amount or variety of followers. See for example: “Kənd Hayati - YouTube”; “MarBitter- Malaysian Village Food - YouTube”; “Indonesia Rural Life - YouTube”; and “Johanna’s Dream Home - YouTube.”

give any sufficient answer to this question, I can at least conclude that Li's popularity is not a blueprint for a post-colonial reorientation of cultural aspiration.

When trying to understand the softness of Li's apparent soft power, I must also mention the lack of words in her videos. The few times we hear her speak, her words are almost always trivial phrases addressed to her grandmother, and in a Sichuan dialect rather than Mandarin: as if we are overhearing a private conversation. But it is the general wordlessness that remains, giving the impression that there is no particular lesson to be learned from these videos that might otherwise resemble craft and cooking tutorials — or perhaps that the lesson is not really one that could be conveyed in words. But the wordlessness is likely more than an aesthetic decision: faced with the impossibility of conveying a message that would satisfy both those for whom truthfulness can mean only a public denouncement of Chinese totalitarianism and the strict media control in China, there are few other options for expression. But it is in this restricted agency that we might find some of the aesthetic power of Li's videos — their use of non-verbal forms of communication is both a consequence of the political context and what allows them to engage with publics outside of China regardless of their familiarity with the specificities of the traditions that she showcases. To her sympathetic audience, Li's videos do not require any explicit declaration of intent in order to be imbued with good intentions. In fact the lack of words only reinforces the idea of universality tied to the other affective elements: the rural landscape, the proximity to food production as a moral good, familial roots.



Screen Capture from "So... it goes like... the life of peas"  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOvJ9Tg\\_rp4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOvJ9Tg_rp4)

## HEURISTIC NAÏVETY

If Li's work seems to deliberately mobilise the affective markers that make it possible to attribute such good intentions, this does not mean that she is able to control the exact intentions any more than other dead authors.<sup>8</sup> But her popularity reveals the readiness among a certain portion of the social media public to engage in this form of reading.

The current form of strictly organised digital social networks allows Li or whoever possesses the rights to these videos to capitalise directly from the good feelings evoked. Li is one among many social media content creators that fit into the category of CottageCore — a term used to describe mainly social media and fashion content aimed at exhibiting a nostalgic longing for a simpler life, which has of course been derided in the media for

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<sup>8</sup> For a discussion of the ways affects are imbued into cultural objects and the way this influences our ability to interpret them, see the works by Ngai and Ahmed.

being “an escape from modern reality” (Braff). In one of the few academic papers to address this genre of online content, focusing on “ways of seeing the countryside” in Britain during the Covid-19 pandemic, the authors Jilly Boyce Kay and Helen Wood go one step further in their indictment of consumers of CottageCore content, calling their reaction to the pandemic a:

*misdiagnosis* of the problem, from which this need for “escape” is imagined; that is to say, the problem is here construed as urban aesthetics and industrial production, rather than the system of capitalism per se. Furthermore, the framing of ‘cottagecore’ and pastoral scenes as escapes from contemporary ills continues a long narrative tradition that obscures the fact that the countryside is also scarred by inequality, poverty and exploitation. Of course the desire for a cottagecore aesthetic took on a material, literal form only for those who could afford it – and many wealthy city dwellers, who are highly unrepresentative of most people in the UK, were able to ‘escape’ to rural areas to ‘sit out’ the pandemic in rented cottages and second homes. (287)

As sympathetic as I am to their concluding call for a “communal re-ruralization of the world” (285) their statement is almost a perfect example of the false dichotomy that I let Adorno satirise earlier, in which illusory culture becomes nothing more than a means to conceal the *real* material conditions. One could certainly find examples of this form of conscious misrepresentation for the sake of personal profit, and we could extend that criticism to all forms of culture produced for profit — economic or otherwise — under capitalism, but what would this achieve? I would prefer instead to raise the question of what indeed would constitute an adequate cultural response to the current order of capitalism. One that did not resort to glossing over or simplifying things using aesthetic associations. It is in the

absence of an obvious and simple answer to this question that productive criticality can take place.

When one of the authors of a women's guide to *homesteading*, during their article on CottageCore, tells the BBC that "In our fast-paced society, the process of making, doing, feeling connected, has virtually been eliminated" (Kashi). It seems crude even, when admitting to the tired buzzwords of that sentence, to reduce this sentiment to a complaint about urban aesthetics and industrial production. Perhaps both the naïve consumer and the critical theorist are aware of the difficulty of adequately representing the behemoth of capitalism, but it is the projecting of naïvety upon the CottageCore audience that allows any discussion to even emerge, without it there is only difficulty.

I would suggest that the logic of the above critique of CottageCore fails because the authors mistake the *misdiagnosis* they identify for the problem rather than its symptom. This likelihood of insisting on the failed good intentions, the sweetness, rather than noticing the structure behind it, is exactly how inattentive — or deliberately hasty — interpretations of certain objects come to reproduce or conserve dominant social structures. Requiring Li to speak out against the Chinese state in a way that is obviously impossible, the stance taken by *RFA* in the previous section, makes it possible to simply dismiss any statement from within China that does not directly conform to their worldview — and if this requirement is extended to even larger political frameworks, it is only that much easier to dismiss her videos and others like them. Resisting oppressive ways of life is judged against an impossible standard of systemic revolution. It is easy to understand the consumption of hyper-aestheticised CottageCore content as a failed attempt to resist capitalist signification, but the more fundamental question this leaves us with is: why is it so difficult to imagine such aesthetic resistance if recognising its inadequacy is so easy, and what



does the — even if failed — attempt teach us about the potential and wish for such resistance?

The ability to consume media like that produced by Li is not the reserve of an economic elite who can afford to emulate her — any more than any of the other media on *YouTube*. The comments of admiration and longing from her fans around the world happen in spite of the obvious impossibility of realising the content of her cinematic idyll for most of the viewers, which the aesthetic extremity of her videos only serve to underline — particularly the fact that her popularity rose so markedly during the pandemic lockdown. The fact that people could still find pleasure in Li's videos despite such circumstantial obstacles seem to deserve to be called something more than *escapism*.

The admiration is directed towards her performance of a seemingly untiring effort to create for herself and her grandmother a beautiful rural life (in other words her “hard work”) which is rather different from simply expressing aspiration towards her material possessions (although of course the beautiful scenery and carefully staged domestic setting cannot be excluded from such a judgement). The *hard work* is naturally not representative of the kind of mass agricultural production that is currently most common in China — one online article about her mentions how she has been criticised for this misrepresentation on Chinese social media (Yan) — and is perhaps best compared to a very involved form of hobby gardening, or advanced kitchen gardening, but to charge these videos with the task of educating the audience on modern agriculture is to misunderstand their function entirely.

Tellingly, the admiration does not disappear in the comments under an interview video in which Li explains the amount of work that goes into producing these videos — both that which is depicted in them and the technical work of shooting and editing (“LiziQi talks about the process of

video production 李子柒做视频的由来[ENGSUB]”). Naïvety therefore seems like too simple a concept to describe the attachment the audience has to the videos. Optimism, in the sense described by Berlant, “involves a sustaining inclination to return to the scene of fantasy that enables you to expect that *this* time, nearness to *this* thing will help you or a world to become different in just the right way” (2). An inclination that may or may not be naïve, but is always expectant or generative. To consume Li’s videos does not necessarily mean to expect them to provide the answer to the problem of imagining a life outside of the current capitalist order and the alienating and stifling effects it has on their lives, but it might allow the audience to sustain the fantasy/hope that such an answer exists.

I need to stress here that I am not suggesting that sustaining such a hope for an answer is guaranteed to produce any political action. Nor that the ways of life promoted in Li’s videos are in themselves incompatible with capitalist modes. Although I think the concept of some form of *optimism* is useful for understanding the agency of the people who are connected by their sense of oppression from which Li’s videos are able to provide some respite, I want to be careful not to make any moral distinctions based on their optimistic attachment. Sarah Ahmed reminds us that hierarchies of pleasure or happiness may easily end up corresponding to social hierarchies. And her observation that “expressions of horror about contemporary cultures of happiness involve a class horror that happiness is too easy, too accessible, and too fast” (12) is interesting to compare with the reactions to CottageCore consumption previously mentioned: taking pleasure in feminised domestic tasks is seen as escapism, and a retreat from politics, most likely because it doesn’t correspond to traditional modes of “high happiness” (that are linked to the *mind*) or non-feminist ideas of the *political*; but it is simultaneously criticised by the cultural theorists for symbolically inscribing these domestic pleasures with a political potential

that is seen as misdirected. Just like feminised emotion is both saintly and irrational, so feminised pleasure is both bourgeois and unserious. But to conclude from this that the re-signification of feminised domesticity in CottageCore media is necessarily progressive would be to repeat the very hierarchical movement that Ahmed warns against — still, understanding this double-bind does help with mapping out the agency of the audience.

An important criticism to consider is that this form of media and the optimistic attachment it inspires is highly individualistic — the kind of good life that Li portrays is mostly limited to the space of the immediate family and co-inhabitants. From the point of view of environmental critique, such optimism falls short of addressing the problem because it places too much emphasis on personal responsibility rather than the structural inequalities that sustain the damaging and oppressive forms of life that the audience might dream to end. And the importance of community in resistance is virtually absent, even as the mostly invisible context of the videos are *the village*. This, I would argue, is far more problematic than the feminised aesthetic that Kay and Wood criticise, and the real obstacle to their concluding call for “communal re-ruralization.” But such critique must also consider the context in which this genre came to prominence: when much of the audience, unable to leave their homes, would have found it more than a little difficult to sustain many of the communities in which they usually counted themselves. Li certainly did not overcome this lack of community, but we have yet to see the full effects of this prolonged dissolution of physical public life.

In describing all these constraints, I hope I have made it plausible that the consumption of Li’s videos is not a proof of naïvety on the part of the audience, that these videos are viewed not necessarily with wilful ignorance of the problems surrounding them but in spite of the awareness such problems.

My intention by insisting on this distinction is not to dismiss the important work done by intersectional feminist and environmentalist scholars of making visible and thinkable the vast inequalities of environmental and social destruction across the globe,<sup>9</sup> or the efforts of those activists and artists described by said scholars. Such work is undeniably critical. But in light of the enormity of the crisis, I want to also draw focus to the way critical optimism can be negotiated and increase agency from within a framework of the failing Western ideals of political agency like liberal democracy and international cooperation. Despite geographical, political, and social differences, at the very least the audience of Li's videos are able to coalesce around a fantasy that even with the worst-case scenarios "there will be good days" (Barry) as a psychologist interviewed by the *New York Times* had told his patient suffering from panic attacks induced by fears of climate change.

Understanding the elements that make such negotiation/sustaining of optimism possible is crucial for preserving the agency for change, even if there is no guarantee that such elements will align with our own normative ideas for a *good* future. How can we criticise consumption of CottageCore media for not being an adequate form of resistance to capitalism without questioning the presumption that places all feminised domestic pleasure in the realm of the bourgeois? To Wendy Brown, such easy recourse to an idea of 'the middleclass' as an oppositional point to validate criticism or a claim for rights risks naturalising it and becomes "the reason why class is invariably named but rarely theorized or developed" (395).

The affective markers of idealised femininity and supra-racial authenticity that coalesce in Li's work are perhaps the two features that most explicitly express the way it is sometimes difficult to tell idealism and

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<sup>9</sup> See for example: Nixon (2011); and Wynter (2015).

domination apart. To her audience, the optimistic attachment to gendered domestic practices and to a supra-racial authenticity is both a violent disavowal of the oppression of the present ordinary and a way to imagine a positive self-identification despite it.

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