

The Representations of New Women in Contemporary China: Li ZiQi and Her Lifestyle in the New Digital Era

Jiehui Zhang

Tianjin Foreign Studies University, China.

Abstract

Under the background of the rapid development of social media, content plays an important role in the development of short videos. More and more videos with personal brand have become popular among the public. The blogger Li ZiQi's short videos have set a good example, with its intensive content and multi-dimensional communication. This article attempts to give a picture of representations of new women in the mass media. It reviews the history of Chinese woman image, which is in turn placed in the unique sociocultural context of China, in order to find how she is different from the traditional women's images. Here this study conducts analysis of three Li Zi Qi's video which attract fans through high viscosity. This shows that Li ZiQi is a new symbol and spokesperson of new woman in contemporary China.

Keywords

Digital media; women representations; feminism; Chinese women; Li Zi Qi.

1. Introduction

1.1. The Emergence of Li ZiQi in Chinese Digital Media

With the popularity of video platform, short videos have become the darling of the new generation of Internet users, vloggers have been springing up with content. According to Ila Patel, "the mass media can serve as a major source of education and information" [1]. The biggest social value of the new channel lies in breaking the monopoly of traditional media channel resource. Being easy to connect the vlogger and audience, the vlogger's personality and can be carried by content or lifestyle, even ordinary people can access to "personal value expression", and thus obtain a group of audience. So, media plays a crucial role in cultivating identity. It embeds personalized life value in specialized content, attracts fans through high viscosity. The food vlogger Li ZiQi has a unique charming rural life as the main content and gained a large number of fans.

Li ZiQi is tantamount to the fairy from the ancient mountains. In front of the camera, she always appears in a set of Chinese Han clothing which is made of rough fabric. Also, she seldom say words in the entire video, with a light background sound and the natural sound of cooking wood. Everything is authentic, such as firewood, rice, oil and salt. She records the production process of each cuisine with a daily narrative, showing the idyllic life, providing a good enjoyment and imagination for the restless soul in the hustle and bustle of the city. She has explored and developed a new living style of the land of idyllic beauty. Li ZiQi's videos can help people fulfill the "dreams of the countryside" and convey a positive attitude toward life. She is a "Wonder Woman" in the eyes of her fans, as she enables people to experience the life in the countryside which contemporary Chinese people strive for. The spirit of struggling for independence and self-reliance conveyed by her distinct life experience has attracted great audience's attention continuously.

1.2. The Online Influence of Li ZiQi to Chinese Women

In the face of these foods produced or made by "traditional handcraft" in the rural environment of "nostalgia and homesickness", the contemporary urban female white-collar group's desire and curiosity have been greatly satisfied. According to Roberta Pearson, "fans have always been at the forefront of media industry transformations, considers the wider implications for the reconfigured relationships between producer and consumer in the digital economy." [2]. Most fans expressed their admiration and appreciation for the young girl, believing that this is the "desired life". Many fans even shouted out lines like "Marry a wife like Li ZiQi". In return, In May 2020, Li has gained 23 million fans on Weibo, and each of her video has received more than 5 million views on the YouTube. The upsurge is in line with what Li ZiQi said: "My brand philosophy is – slow life, new tradition". And she was awarded by People's Daily, the official Weibo account of the central committee of the communist youth league, CCTV news, Xinhua news agency and many other media. She also served as the "promotion ambassador for leaders of China's rural youth to become rich" and Chengdu intangible cultural heritage promotion ambassador.

With many praising her short video for living China's traditional idyllic rural life through cultural export, the rapid popularity of Li ZiQi has attracted the attention and discussion of fans at home and abroad. Is that because of her "traditional" representation of woman that makes her an icon among her female fans? Is her "traditional" representations of the female the equivalent to what is presented in Chinese history? These questions are what I aim to answer in this article. I will start from the historical reflection of women's images in Mainland China. Then I will analyse Li ZiQi 's videos. The in-depth analysis of its content characteristics can deeply demonstrate the new woman role played by Li ZiQi.

2. Women's Images in Chinese Society

2.1. Images of Chinese Women

With the development of the society and the change of the time, Chinese women's self-cognition is constantly strengthened. After casting off thousands of years of spiritual shackles, who become the great force of creation of material and spiritual civilization. They not only inherit the traditional women's diligence and courage, but also have the spirit of reform and innovation with the times. Chinese women have created "three self" spirit in the new digital era: self-reliance, self-reliance and self-improvement [3]

2.2. Tradition vs. Modern Times

In the old society, women had no voice, neither did they have distinct social identity. Rural women represent the images of simple, pure, kind, hard-working. The reason is that the rural background of Chinese traditional rural culture determines the closure of rural culture. Farmers are highly dependent on the traditional farming lifestyle and do not need to communicate with the outside world. Due to the relatively closed cultural characteristics, the production and living range of farmers are limited to relatively closed families. In this closed rural cultural atmosphere, the social identity of traditional rural women tends to be more stable. Compared with rural men, rural women's living environment is more restricted, and their living conditions are limited to the communities mainly composed of acquaintances, and families.

During the Cultural Revolution, the cultural image positioning new women greatly broke through the traditional gender division, that is women from the role of wife, mother, housewife and so on. As a social group that has shaken off the feudal shackles of male superiority and female inferiority for thousands of years, "Women hold up half the sky" has become a good overview of women's image in the "Mao era". In the 1990s, with the transformation of the country's mainstream ideology, the patriarchal ideology recovered rapidly, the ideology of

women was changed from leading ideology to subordinate ideology. On the one hand, women continue to play the dual role of "being like an iron man outside and being like a woman at home" (在外像铁人, 在家像女人). In the male-oriented culture of the consumer society, men and women are put into the mode of "seeing" and "being seen" respectively. When women only become the objects to be seen, their ornamental value becomes the only criterion to measure their value, and women's independent personality, self-awareness and creativity are eliminated. The images of women in the mass media are ruthlessly sexualized, objectified and commercialized.

In today's fast-moving era of economy, the eternal pursuit still persists. For example, human beings' spiritual growth, their persistent thinking about the future, and their concern for a more perfect order of the sexes. As a civilized country, the women of new China should always maintain their passion to participate in the world and their courage to create a life, so as to provide a model of the reference and learning of women all over the world for the personal growth of women and the sublimation of women groups. As Chang Jiang claims that "Chinese women's self-empowerment is derived from a new female identity into the 'harmonious society'..." [4]. While, Whether Li's representation of women challenge or subvert the traditional images of Chinese woman? Does she represent the traditional woman that described in the history? Does the ZiQi phenomenon suggests the way in which Chinese women's images have been transformed to some extent? Here I will answer the abovementioned questions by analyzing three of her videos. I choose Chinese cuisine and traditional furniture themes since they are the most popular content on Youtube.

3. Li ZiQi: A Representation of A New Women Image in Contemporary China

3.1. Li ZiQi's Video

Table 1. Li ZiQi's top 5 YouTube videos (May 12, 2020)

Ranking	Video title and upload time	Views	Comments	Likes
1	(年货小零食特辑) A special program on New Year snacks (2019/1/31)	54,905,349	37,000	770,000
2	(吊柿饼) It's a red mountain, and in the fall, it's natural to make some sweet persimmons (2018/10/8)	43,489,396	16,000	350,000
3	(竹沙发) Using bamboo to make some sophisticated old furniture——Bamboo Sofa (2018/9/24)	42,598,956	53,000	930,000
4	(柳州螺蛳粉) Satisfied with eating, spicy and comfortable, just a bowl of Liuzhou "Luoshifen" (2019/8/11)	36,099,908	26,000	440,000
5	(蜂蜜柚子茶) In the late autumn when the chill is getting thicker, it is good to come to the bowl of warm and fragrant honey citron tea (2017/11/6)	24,039,581	8171	230,000

Li grew up with her grandparents in a rural part of Sichuan province in southwestern China. When she was 14, she went to the city in search of work, but she decided to return to the countryside in 2012 in order to take care of her grandmother. "When I worked in the city, it

was about survival," Li says. "Now when I work in the countryside, I feel like I'm truly living." she said in an interview from South China Morning Post. The familiar rural scene and life skills show her character image -- the real peasant girl in the video. As one foreign fan commented on her, "Beautiful and Strong". In the video, we can see that although Li ZiQi is beautiful and thin, she has a lot of energy in her small body. She can cut bamboo alone to make a bamboo bed. Her ingenuity, positive attitude and stunning masterpieces prove that women can live a good life on their own, which represents the most important figure -- the independent modern woman. The Chinese traditional life around Li ZiQi makes modern white-collar women who are immersed in urban life feel the joy and deep yearning. From my point of view, the emergence of the symbol of Li ZiQi as a successful woman is also the embodiment of the progress of The Times.

In the process of urbanization, when the "modernity" anxiety of urban people is fully exposed, the slow pace of rural life becomes people's "yearning life". This series of Li ZiQi's videos take food production as the content, which contains the ancient style and beauty as the form, and the pastoral ecology as the connotation, fully showing the concept of "light health, new tradition, slow life(轻养生、新传统、慢生活)" and the personality of Li ZiQi. Broadly speaking, most fan's first impression of the Li ZiQi's video is pastoral, comfortable, poetic and quiet. Some foreign netizens said that the video of Li ZiQi made them regain their hope, for example, one of netizens named Hannah said: "Thank you for showing us country life, because city life is full of stress and pollution. I hope I can live here one day."

Li ZiQi's videos show each of the different sounds ' movements, such as the sound of chopping vegetables, frying vegetables, sawing bamboo, burning a fire, catching water, closing a door, and even walking in the field. However, In the real busy life, most modern white-collar women feel irritable because of telephone ring and other sounds. So a kind of music called "white noise" has become popular, such as the sound of rain. This sounds can help people become mentally focused and not be disturbed by other things and make people relax physically and mentally. While the "white noise" in Li ZiQi's short video have the same function, which let a person get a moment of peace from the busy environment. Besides, Li ZiQi 's video has almost no narration or subtitles which makes her more mysterious. Only when there are some plants or utensils that most audiences don't understand, simple Chinese subtitles will be provided. One of netizens Ghost Street believes that the sound of video is relaxing: "One of the important reasons for us viewers to relax from watching her videos is that the sound of Chinese music is soft and inspiring. The ambient sounds are immersive." Also, the disappearance of her voice makes audience could fully experience through images and actions. Her videos show the simplicity of traditional Chinese peasant life, while the shooting and editing of the videos create a gentle and classical Chinese connotation.

Also, the cold color screen and the slow narration create a comfortable idyllic life. For example, the scene of digging bamboo shoots in the forest in Liuzhou "Luoshifen"(螺狮粉) adopts a uniform cool color. In the fresh and natural tone, the artistic conception of "land of idyllic beauty"(世外桃源) in the video is particularly moving. However, the modern people's life is monotonous. Beautiful rural life and scenery are what contemporary urban life lacks. Her pastoral rural life is quiet, but also in the healing of modern people who need to be healed of the mind, in a way of life beyond materialism. Her life style cater to the needs of people who want to relieve stress, release emotions from the moment the anxiety of life. The video of Li ZiQi can give people a soothing and peaceful feeling. This feeling of current field to the viewers, namely "I am not looking at the festival, I'm looking at the living", shortens the distance between the audience and Li ZiQi. In the new media era, text is combined with "multi-sensory modes like images, sound, video, graphics and color. The combined materials greatly enrich the expression forms of cross-cultural communication, enhance the cognitive effect of human being and the appeal of stories, that why Li's videos bring her so many followers.

Li ZiQi usually wears a little make-up in her short video, which breaks the traditional farmer's image. However, the traditional farmers tend to wear dirt dirty clothes because they fry a dish in daily life as lampblack, even if occasionally go the pick activities in the suburb. In many people's impression, traditional farmers are usually kind but backward, hardworking but living in poverty. In addition, they are also characterized by passivity of thinking and narrowness. What makes Li ZiQi so special is that she seems to enjoy the natural, simple life in the presentation of her short video. The indifference between modern civilization and traditional customs gradually melted away. Whether in the field or in the kitchen, Li ZiQi seems to live in a full of poetry rather trivial life, which is also the appeal of her short video for many viewers. In the eyes of many audience, they consider rural poverty and backwardness is exactly a new experience and yearning. The rural areas with agricultural culture can arouse people's full affection. Therefore, it is not surprising that netizens are attracted by Li ZiQi 's short video about the countryside. The greatest value of Li ZiQi 's popularity lies in realizing the transformation from the traditional farmer's "object" identity to their "subject" identity in the new era, which reflects the reconstruction of cultural power relations in the new media era.

The video of Li Ziqi usually focuses on making an object or cooking a food, the production of food begins with the preparation of raw materials in all of her food videos, and it is not uncommon for preparation to take days, weeks or even months in the pursuit of authentic flavor. What does such an important detail imply? Obviously, if we were just trying to survive, we wouldn't be so relaxed about preparing food. She has got rid of the state of seeking existence, and what she pursues is the beauty of seeking truth. For instance, at the beginning of the production of sweet persimmons(吊柿饼) video, she recorded the picture of collecting persimmons in a red mountain, and she showed the whole production process of sweet persimmons. The whole video switched to several scenes. Filmed scenes were almost stationary flat, build an idyllic aesthetic atmosphere. The situational narrative mode in her videos is highly in line with the aesthetic taste of her fans and achieves an excellent communication effect. Instead of being led by life, she is leading life, and she finds and creates the beauty of life by returning to it. What touches the audience's heartstrings is the poetic state, real emotion and free mind. "I'm just filming my life," Liziqi says. "Or rather, I'm just filming the life that I want." In real life, the white-collar women often give people the impression of professional, capable. And most of fans who are white-collar women eager to be independent and become the leader in their own life . So, the unity of characters in Li ZiQi's video has provided more and more modern female audiences with a reliable spiritual idol.

Li ZiQi shows the image of an independent, hard-working and capable woman. From her images, we can see the Chinese women's concentration, composure and love for life, as well as the great creativity and perseverance of the Chinese nation in making use of the existing natural resources. Although the pastoral life presented in the camera is far away from the daily life of ordinary people, we can still see the "out of the world"(出世)the traditional Chinese value. What it embodies is the desire of harmony between man and nature, which is the realistic reflection of Laozi's thought of " the essence is consistent with the nature"(道法自然). Taoism thought is the earliest sustainable development concept of human beings, and also advocates that individual life should be natural. The call of human nature, which expresses people's pursuit and yearning for a good life with natural beauty. It is because of this that fans of different colors and languages can empathize and resonate with the Chinese woman story told by Li ZiQi.

In her video, Li Ziqi also shows her strong ability in creation. Many objects in her yard are made by her own hands, and many of them are not common in city life. For example, at the top of her YouTube channel, there is one about her own production of the Bamboo Sofa (竹沙发) – using bamboo to make a sophisticated old furniture. She writes about the value of Chinese traditional culture by the spirit of craftsman. If you zoom in, her hands are rough and sometimes have

bruises on her fingers. She used her own hands to create practical household items and delicious food, reflecting a hard-working and tenacious farmer character. Li ZiQi fully undertakes to spread the confidence of Chinese farming culture. In addition, she also takes care of her grandmother. The main function of grandma in her work is to accompany and share. Their relationship is a metaphor for the inheritance of modernity and tradition, which brings warm affection to the audience at the other end of the video. It is these spiritual qualities that make fans understand Li ZiQi, and gradually have a deeper understanding of the Chinese countryside and the Chinese woman.

Li ZiQi's short video shows the charm of Chinese traditional culture from many aspects. It is said that art comes from life and is higher than life. Li ZiQi chooses to spread Chinese traditional culture from the perspective of art and presents the face of Chinese countryside to everyone in an artistic way. Her hometown had beautiful scenery, the materials from which she made things were very beautiful, and her hands were rough but clean. Her kitchen not only did not let a person feel backward, but everywhere reflect the distinctive village. It said that although the content presented by Li ZiQi is "old" tradition, but it is in a "new" way -- new media. The success of Li ZiQi on public social platforms at home and abroad and her personal experience have resonated with audiences.

In the wave of short video communication in new media, most of the Li ZiQi's videos are within ten minutes, which is in line with the current trend of fast Internet communication. Li ZiQi has not only achieved success on its own, bringing the belief of positive life to many audiences, also created classic cases in the inheritance of Chinese traditional culture and cross-cultural communication. The beautiful idyllic scene in the video has the sense of human homeland, and the delicious food sets up a bridge of communication between China and the west. The blogs, forums, Youtube, WeChat and other new media not only record and forward the latest social information in real time, but also release the long-buried historical and cultural memories. The cultural memory of video turns into a positive one, and the communication effect gradually spreads to overseas. Compared with the official mainstream media, the short video culture communication of Li ZiQi has two advantages: the low cost and high flexibility make everyone have the hope to become a preacher of traditional culture communication.

4. Conclusions

In the age of the Internet, cultural and emotional exchanges have more carriers, channels and platforms, enabling people of different time and space to transcend differences, break down barriers and narrow the distance between them. The popularity of Li ZiQi shows not only the charm of traditional Chinese culture, but also the new woman image deep down the socio-cultural context. Through the phenomenon of Li ZiQi, we can see that the story of ordinary individuals achieves cultural transmission in the contemporary era. In the spread of new women image, we should keep pace with the times, actively adapt to the era of media dissemination of ecological change, continuously strengthen the innovation of the content and form.

Yet this article has some limitations. The e-business realization mode is becoming more and more popular in the content field. The short video industry began to exchange channels, mainly to establish cooperation with various enterprises including e-commerce. The issue of keeping content attractive on the road to commercialization. For short video bloggers, the production and dissemination of high-quality content is an important prerequisite for their personal and brand promotion. And with the commercialization of Li ZiQi, will its creative content cause the audience's uncomfortableness and gradually lose its appeal? In addition, the content production of cultural products needs continuous creativity and renewal. How to keep the audience's appeal is a problem that needs deep thinking.

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