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Piper Spooner

April 7, 2021

#chinesecuisine #cottagecore: Chinese Food and Locality in Contemporary Social Media

by

Piper Spooner

Dr. Jia-Chen Fu

Adviser

Chinese Studies

Dr. Jia-Chen Fu

Adviser

Dr. Jenny Wang Medina

Committee Member

Dr. Chris Suh

Committee Member

Dr. Maria Franca Sibau

Committee Member

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Piper Spooner

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Abstract

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By Piper Spooner

The term “Chinese food” inevitably conjures a specific set of images, ideas, and phantom tastes and smells. But how do we know that a dish is Chinese, or what Chinese food even is? This project examines this question through the YouTube and Weibo videos of Chinese food vloggers Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge, both of whom have significant followings inside and outside of China, and whose videos are alluring for their beauty and picture of a self-sufficient, farm-to-table lifestyle.

Building off existing scholarship about national cuisine and food studies, media studies, tourism, and cultural studies, this project analyzes the context, content, production, and consumption of these videos and explores the ways that, as part of our contemporary media landscape of user-oriented social media, these videos construct and present very specific ideas about Chinese food that are not actually stable, definitive, or representative.

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Introduction

The Joy of Blank

There is a Chinese idiom that goes “民以食为天,” or “the people consider food as heaven.” Since learning this phrase, I have always thought it was funny and apt, firstly because of the sheer amount of emphasis placed on eating and feasting by Chinese holidays, popular culture, and travel-tourist websites; and secondly, because as someone who enjoys eating good food very much, I could recognize myself in these characters. Aside from its superficial comedic appeal or its idiomatic use, what exactly does this mean? As an idiom, its meaning perhaps is fixed as expressing that food is the primary need of the people or that sustenance is required to fuel the nation. Yet even these two interpretations, while semantically similar, are quite different semiotically.

民 (*min*) or “people” may refer to humanity as a whole, but that discounts the relative specificity of *min*; “people” may refer to a group of people who may or may not be of the same ethnicity or nationality; “people” may also implicitly refer to Chinese people, but which Chinese? *Chinese* may encompass citizens of the People’s Republic of China (PRC) or Mainland China; those living in the Republic of China (ROC) in Taiwan; ethnically Han people; recognized ethnic minorities in China; ethnic Chinese in any number of different countries; Mandarin-speakers; speakers of any Chinese dialect, etc. Under scrutiny, this word is unstable, and the *the* qualifier that precedes *min* makes a difference in interpreting the referent of *min*. Perhaps the only stable part of *min* is that it refers to people plural rather than a singular person.

食 (*shi*) or “food” can also either mean “meal” or “edible,” the latter of which opens up questions of the demarcation between what is edible or inedible from a nutritional but also cultural standpoint, and which also calls to mind Claude Lévi-Strauss’ concept of the raw-cooked

dichotomy as thematically connected to nature-culture or savage-civilized dichotomies.¹ Taken together with the *min*'s multiplicity of meanings and the grammatical structure of the idiom, whose food are we talking about? It could be something as clinical and fundamental as the caloric and nutritive make-up of various items that contribute to human health; it could be the idea of good food (which of course is subjective) and the affective satisfaction of imagining a meal; however, in its linguistic context, we may safely conclude that this refers to some version of food for some version of Chinese people.

Finally, 天 (*tian*) or “heaven” and perhaps the most straightforward word. Culturally and historically, *tian* referred to the Mandate of Heaven that bestowed political and quasi-religious legitimacy upon the ruler of imperial “China.”² Though *tian* has all sorts of other meanings, in this context, it refers precisely to the wonderfully vague but universally known *paradise*; yet, whether paradise signifies a sunny beach, peace and quiet; no fixed schedule or obligations; or a mansion on a crystal sea, there is an oblique theme of solitude and freedom from one’s current predicament. Regardless, like *min* and *shi*, *tian* is also subjective and malleable. I say all of this to show that even something as simple as a five-character Chinese idiom has all sorts of complexities and cultural-historical implications; also, because this phrase converges with ways that people have spoken and continue to speak about food.

When speaking of food or “cuisine,” it is easy to do so in these terms of collective national or cultural identity, but such a framework is the result of concerted governmental efforts, individual actors or cookbook authors, as well as shifting popular culture. Scholars have established this in slightly different ways: Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson asserts that national

¹ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked: Introduction to a Science of Mythology: I*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1969).

² During the long imperial period, there was no such thing as “China” as we know it since 1949 or even 1911. Boundaries and territories were constantly shifting within and between dynastic and imperial changes, and there was no sense of a geopolitical polity like the modern nation-state. Thus we must be careful when using “China” to describe the imperial period of Chinese history.

cuisine has been linked to place or *terroir* literally and ideologically through language and text (cookbooks); Stephanie Assman, and Katarzyna J. Cwiertka argue that in the Japanese and Korean cases, government initiatives and political actors are responsible for creating and promoting the parameters of national cuisine using cultural and economic influence and apparatuses like UNESCO to canonize a body of cuisine.³ Arjun Appadurai analyzes Indian cookbooks to demonstrate the emergence of a national cuisine via the assertion of a postcolonial identity as well as a dialectic response to the recognition of regional or minority cuisines; James Farrer discusses how national cuisine is one framework within a larger discourse of culinary social fields that shape collective identity, politics, and power relations.⁴

Importantly, the ideas about a culture or place's cuisine as well as the understanding of one's own cultural and culinary context is also greatly informed by one's habitus, which encompasses one's cultural, social, political, linguistic, and economic context.⁵ All of this to say, our ideas about food (and everything else) are shaped by our environment as much and arguably more than we shape it, and this has been well-studied. However, when analyzing culinary habitus in a contemporary setting, one cannot discount the major influence that visual media on "new media platforms" exerts. This includes television programming and films, but increasingly applies to more individualistic and user-based format of social media spaces like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube, as well as newer or non-English/American-founded platforms

³ Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson, "Culinary Nationalism," *Gastronomica*, 10.1 (2010), pp. 102-109; Stephanie Assman, "The Remaking of a National Cuisine: The Food Education Campaign in Japan" in *Globalization and Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Contact Zones*, ed. James Farrer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) pp. 165-185; Katarzyna J. Cwiertka, "The Global *Hansik* Campaign and the Commodification of Korean Cuisine" in *The Korean Popular Culture Reader*, eds. Kyung Hyun Kim and Youngmin Choe (Duke University Press, 2014) pp. 363-384.

⁴ Arjun Appadurai, "How to Make a National Cuisine: Cookbooks in Contemporary India," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 30.1 (1988): pp. 3-24; James Farrer, ed, *Globalization and Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Contact Zones* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

like TikTok, Twitch, Weibo, V Live, WeChat, and so on. These are all significant in disseminating ideas and shaping perceptions of food as anything else.

These two frameworks of national cuisine and social media influence converge in my examination of how we identify Chinese cuisine within our contemporary media landscape; what kinds of narratives this kind of media tells us about Chinese food; and how we as consumers interact with and (re)interpret these narratives. There's no singular way any of these things happen, but there are clear trends that are being produced and consumed that feed into each other and influence the way that we "know" Chinese food. My project examines these questions through the YouTube videos of Chinese food vloggers Li Ziqi (李子柒) and Dianxi Xiaoge (滇西小哥), both of whom have significant followings inside and outside of China, and whose videos are alluring for their beauty, their self-reliance, and farm-to-table lifestyle.⁶ My analysis of their videos applies to the actual content of their videos; the technical and practical elements that are involved in filming, editing, and publishing each video; and the ways that their audiences react and respond to them. Importantly, while I draw on previous works of scholarship on national cuisine, Li and Dianxi's particular articulation of a (Chinese) national identity is less deliberate than previous examples, and is not necessarily in conflict with a local specificity. Rather, these women establish Chinese cuisine by way of a constructed locality that is not specifically Chinese at all. *Min* becomes general because of the *tian* that manifests in these videos.

Similar to the work about national cuisine, these women's constructed locality is in conversation with preexisting scholarship about "the local" but deviates from it in meaningful ways. Primarily, the local has been understood as the antithesis of the global, including the

⁶ At the time of writing, Li Ziqi has 14.7 million YouTube subscribers and 27.5 million fans on Weibo; Dianxi Xiaoge has 7.13 million YouTube subscribers and 4.9 million fans on Weibo.

homogenizing and exploitative forces of capitalism, industrialization, and technology. On a slightly smaller scale, locality stands in contrast to a larger national polity or consciousness; it preserves regional specificity against a larger generality. Finally, the local is also a source of the romantic imaginary; it evokes a collective nostalgia for a past containing stronger social bonds and upright morality in contrast to a present of social and self-alienation. In these videos, the locality that the two women establish is ambiguously universal and transcends the national while asserting claims about national cuisine at the same time; while the women present a paradise that calls upon an idea of the peace, tranquility, and freedom of *tian*, they very much take advantage of the global forces and anxieties that drive people to their visual heaven.

In order to better understand how these videos work in the shaping of Chinese food, I first situate them within a culinary media genre and examine the ways that they simultaneously draw on previous culinary media producers such as Fu Pei-mei, Julia Child, and Zhao Yang Buwei and how they depart from these figures. I also compare and contrast the features and techniques of Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos with other visual culinary media, as well as the ways that they repurpose genre conventions.

In chapter two, I discuss the kinds of ideas they are producing as media creators through the content of their videos. I show that through very specific aesthetic choices and features of their videos, such as gender, time, and technology, the two women construct a universal locality that is related to the ways that scholars such as Prasenjit Duara, Svetlana Boym, Eric Rath, and others have previously discussed the formation and meaning of "the local."⁷ I argue that Li and Dianxi's specific construction of locality helps them to establish and enact the dynamics of a host

⁷ Christopher Ali, *Media Localism: The Politics of Place* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017); Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2011); Prasenjit Duara, "Local Worlds: The Poetics and Politics of the Native Place in Modern China," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 99.1 (2000): pp. 13-48; Eric C. Rath, "The Invention of Local Food" in *The Globalization of Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Culinary Contact Zones*, ed. James Farrer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) pp. 145-164.

relationship for the viewers, who become tourists, by drawing on tourism studies and specifically practices of culinary tourism.

In chapter three, I then examine the consumer side of this relationship by analyzing viewer comments on YouTube and the Chinese media platform Weibo to see how people are reacting to these videos, and how in turn these women may or may not be interacting with other people.⁸ I argue that from the perspective of viewers, the relationship that manifests with these women conforms to that of consumers—gastronomic, media, economic, and cultural—in the form of viewers extending their gaze and consumption toward Li and Dianxi’s videos as commodities. I discuss this using scholarship from the fields of media and cultural studies and show that this relationship is complementary to that of the host-tourist from the lens of the video production.

Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge may or may not consider food as heaven, but they certainly *present* food as heaven, or at least, their version of food. The bliss of their food is that it is an ends rather than a means; they actually manifest the literal and aspirational meaning of 民以食为天. Yet, the who of *min* and the what of *shi* remain just as elusive as before in the context of the national food and locality these women present. For both this idiom and these women’s videos, the only firmly Chinese characteristic is linguistic: the Mandarin characters included in the video titles and onscreen text; the Mandarin phrase itself. There is an added physical component for the videos wherein by virtue of very specific Asian ingredients but more specifically Li and Dianxi’s Chinese bodies, the food they are serving must therefore also be Chinese. In any case, these videos are illuminating not for their authoritative or pedagogic stance on Chinese food, but rather

⁸ While I cite specific user-viewer comments in individual chapters, I will only cite the video they are reacting to in the final bibliography for the sake of concision and clarity.

the ways that they map Chineseness onto vague ideas about a local imaginary. The people consider food as heaven. For Li and Dianxi, food becomes heaven. Heaven remains in question.

Chapter One

How Not to Cook and Eat...in Chinese: Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge in Context

Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos belong to a particular media genre of culinary travel and cooking programs that work to position the cooks as hosts of culinary knowledge and place and the viewers as tourists visiting and sampling these aliments. These women's videos all adhere to a similar basic visual and narrative structure: the video opens on a view of a natural landscape of some kind of crop; Li or Dianxi then harvests the crop in question by-hand or using a sickle or machete; they then return home to prepare various dishes using the featured crop. The video shows the variety of different culinary techniques and preparation the women use, which include roasting, fermenting and pickling, stir-frying, chopping, mixing, broiling, steaming, and so on; the camera gets close-up shots of these different steps and of all the food as the women manipulate and plate it.⁹ There are often interspersed shots of nature that subtly indicate the passage of time or act to further immerse the viewer in the women's environments. The videos may include the women interacting with their family members, who are generally absent until the very end of each video, where they dine on these dishes together in a moment of familial and culinary conviviality. The average length of one of Li and Dianxi's videos is eight-and-a-half minutes and six-and-a-half minutes respectively, compressing many different and often time-consuming processes into minutes and seconds.¹⁰ The editing of each video is sharply polished and includes sounds of nature such as chirping birds, wind through trees, flowing water, etc, as well as peaceful, quiet background music that gives the video more of a cinematic quality.

Who exactly are these women, and what are they purporting to do? Upon initial viewing, their videos seem a fairytale-like presentation of Chinese food. It is easy to get distracted and

⁹ For more details about the camera work and editing of specific videos, see chapter three.

¹⁰ For more on the compression of time, see chapter two.

caught up in the beauty of Li and Dianxi's natural surroundings, the relaxing music and sounds of nature, and the peaceful scenes of the women interacting with their environment without any sense of urgency. Once one adjusts to the novelty and sensory onslaught of these videos, it becomes quickly apparent that Li and Dianxi's work in each video is dedicated to food: its cultivation, preparation, presentation, and consumption. Each video shows the women sourcing and using all sorts of ingredients as they prepare meals for their families. There is a semi-instructional element in the sense that they show the viewers what they are doing, but they do not mimic the didactic, tutorial-like nature of other culinary programming. Their focus on Chinese food and their authoritative and cultural positioning acts in ways that are similar to tour guides, but no physical travel occurs for them or the viewers. These women's videos bear similar characteristics to other more common or conventional forms within this genre, but they ultimately diverge to become non-canonical examples in the transforming landscape of culinary media.

The majority of Li and Dianxi's biographical information is published on their own online shops, and much of it is circumscribed. These tidbits of information are self-published and ostensibly self-edited; there is no evidence to suggest that there is any separation between the women themselves and what they say about their lives. These women rarely grant interviews, which further limits the information viewers may ascertain about who they are. Not only is the public information about Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge fairly dramatized, it is also highly polished and clearly controlled in ways that actively work to establish and further the images and personas of these women as family-oriented, self-reliant, and resourceful.¹¹

Li's biography is much more informative and certainly more dramatic than Dianxi's; she left school at an early age before moving to the city where "she struggled much to survive - she

¹¹ I elaborate upon this point in chapter two.

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 when, “in 2012, due to the family misfortune - her grandmother had a serious illness...Li Ziqi immediately decided to give up everything then return [to] her hometown so that she could take full care of her grandmother.”¹² She later decided to begin filming her life in the countryside. In a rare interview, she says that “I simply want people in the city to know where their food comes from” in a pointed rebuke of industrialized, commercialized food chains of contemporary cities.¹³ Now, her videos seem to do much more than simply educate urbanites about food-sourcing and agriculture; she has her own successful online shop on her English website and on the Chinese online mega-retailer, Taobao.¹⁴ She has successfully monetized the immense popularity of her videos and the rural, farm-to-table aesthetic she promotes and now makes claims to “help more people learn and understand Chinese traditions and culture.”¹⁵ If her videos began as a project to show presumably domestic Chinese city-dwellers where their food comes from, now with ever-expanding and global audiences, her videos have a much bigger and difficult task of shouldering everything that falls under “Chinese,” “traditions,” and “culture.” Her successful transmission of such information is less important than the fact that her own website promotes this as one of the purposes of her work.

Dianxi’s website is much less self-mythologizing than Li’s: she writes mostly about the beauty of Yunnan province, where she lives: “I film seasonal ingredients, special local products, really anything that reflects the uniqueness of Yunnan cuisine. I want to show our cuisine to the rest of the world. Hopefully you would [*sic*] want to come and visit my hometown some day, and

¹² “Li Ziqi Biography,” <https://liziqishop.com/blogs/li-ziqi/li-ziqi-biography-story-age>, accessed 23 February 2021.

¹³ “Exclusive Interview With Li Ziqi, China’s Most Mysterious Internet Celebrity,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Goldthread, September 12 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9CfVcXoYh4&ab_channel=Goldthread, 00:02:43-45.

¹⁴ “Li Ziqi Shop: All,” <https://liziqishop.com/collections/all>, accessed 23 February 2021; 李子柒旗舰店 [*Li Ziqi qijian dian*; Li Ziqi flagship store], <https://world.taobao.com/dianpu/576528860.htm>, accessed 23 February 2021.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, <https://liziqishop.com/blogs/li-ziqi/li-ziqi-biography-story-age>.

taste our special food, which is chronicled through days or even months of preparation.”¹⁶ There is no (auto)biographical on her site, instead establishing her desire to promote her local cuisine to outsiders, which notably includes other non-Yunnanese Chinese nationals, not just non-Chinese. She also acknowledges the amount of time that may go into the production of a single video, which Li tends to obscure entirely or at least, quickly gloss over. In an interview, Dianxi reveals a similar backstory to Li: “I moved back to Yunnan because my dad was sick. I was looking for a way to make money and stay in the village. So I started making short food videos...after watching [the success of comedian Papi Jiang’s] videos, I figured we could use videos to promote products from the countryside.”¹⁷ Like Li, Dianxi went from working in the city—in her case, as a policewoman—to returning home to care for a sick relative, where making these food videos became a way to make a living in addition to promoting particular aspects of local, rural life.¹⁸

From these interviews and the women’s video content, we as viewers may draw parallels to other forms of culinary media. While food is perhaps not the only aspect of interest and allure for Li and Dianxi’s audiences, it is the subject of each video, the object of their labor within each frame, and the source of enjoyment at the conclusion of each video as they eat with their families. The images and ideas they are producing and transmitting about Chineseness, gender, labor, technology, and consumption are all predicated on the food they make; even though there are many other ideas and forces at play in these women’s videos, they are produced and then

¹⁶ “Everything About Dianxi Xiaoge 滇西小哥,”

<https://dianxi-xiaoge.com/blogs/news/everything-about-dianxi-xiaoge-%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5>, accessed 23 February 2021.

¹⁷ “Dianxi Xiaoge Exclusive Interview, China’s Viral Cooking Sensation (At Home with DXXG - E1),” *YouTube*, uploaded by Goldthread, February 5 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A_LOp_znuo&list=PL92YWp8gq03H8e19tOK7Ot0z7IYfT31tC&index=4&ab_channel=Goldthread, 00:01:23-2:09.

¹⁸ As previously mentioned, Dianxi has her own English-language website and online shop. It is unclear whether she has a Taobao shop similar to Li’s, though there is this: <https://item.taobao.com/item.htm?id=589682207345>.

consumed through a culinary lens, which requires further contextualization in order to better see the ways that Li and Dianxi's content corresponds to and transforms preexisting culinary media.

The Chinese Media

Situating Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge within a particular media genre requires us to examine them from a Chinese perspective. These women blend these two different forms of culinary media together: they are instructional to extent that they introduce viewers to particular ingredients and techniques of Chinese food, but not so much as to make their foods replicable; they are host insofar as they invite viewers into their culinary spaces, but the only travel that occurs is temporal and incumbent upon the viewer. In a Chinese media context, Li and Dianxi's videos call to mind the earlier twentieth-century work of figures like Zhao Yang Buwei (趙楊步偉) and Fu Pei Mei (傅培梅), both of whom set out to educate English-speaking Western audiences about Chinese cuisine.¹⁹ Both women did so through the medium of cookbooks, and Fu also became quite famous in Taiwan for her culinary television programs.²⁰ Zhao and Fu were both important figures for educating international and domestic audiences about authentic Chinese cuisine. Though no direct lines of inheritance can be drawn between Li and Dianxi and Zhao and Fu, certain parallels do stand out.

Like Zhao, Li and Dianxi's content appeals to non-Chinese-speaking, international audiences who are encountering a particular form of Chinese food for the first time. As mentioned earlier, these audiences may have more culinary capital and knowledge of different cuisines in addition to Chinese, but Li and Dianxi's versions are novel for their techniques and

¹⁹ See Charles W. Hayford, "Open Recipes, Openly Arrived At: *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese* (1945) and the Translation of Chinese Food," *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 45.1-2 (2012): pp. 67-87; See Michelle T. King, "A Cookbook in Search of a Country: Fu Pei-mei and the Conundrum of Chinese Culinary Nationalism," *Culinary Nationalism in Asia*, edited by Michelle T. King, Bloomsbury Publishing Place, 2019, pp. 56-72; See Michelle T. King, "The Julia Child of Chinese Cooking, or the Fu Pei-mei of French Food?: Comparative Contexts of Female Culinary Celebrity," *Gastronomica*, 18.1 (2018): pp. 15-26.

²⁰ See Chao Buwei Yang, *How to Cook and Eat in Chinese*, The John Day Company, 1945, as well as Fu's numerous cookbook volumes.

processes in ways that Chinese food as a whole was for Western audiences during the 1940s-50s who were seeing viewing Chinese food differently from the long-standing image of chop suey.²¹ Though the medium of cookbook versus video is different, and the level of instruction is entirely opposed, there is an openness towards non-Chinese audiences for both as well. Zhao's cookbook has the express intent of teaching English-speakers in North America about Chinese food, which complicates her belonging in this category, but she remains a Chinese media producer transmitting information about Chinese cuisine. Li and Dianxi's videos occasionally include subtitles in English or other languages, but more importantly, do not include voice-over narratives or really an speech at all.²² The absence of their voices removes any potential for a language barrier; it lowers the barrier to entry and allows anyone to watch and enjoy their content with no prerequisites.

In the case of Fu, these women share an onscreen, visually mediated platform for their content. However, Fu's format was much closer aligned to the kinds of models later seen on the Food Network: a woman cooking, looking directly at the camera, explaining the process of making a meal for family.²³ (There is less positioning of Fu in a domestic space, however; while she cooks for her family, she does so using a glorified single burner and elementary-looking table.) Her programs were also meant for primarily Chinese-speaking audiences, though her cookbooks were written in the style of a Chinese-English parallel text.²⁴ Here, the similarity

²¹ See Yong Chen, *Chop Suey, USA: The Story of Chinese Food in America*, Columbia University Press, 2014.

²² Dianxi's have Vietnamese, Korean, Thai, Indonesian, and Hindi subtitle options as well. It is unclear if she has a team of subtitlers or translators helping her.

²³ See "She Raised a Generation of Taiwanese Home Cooks," Luke Tsai, *Taste*, Jun 27 2019, https://www.tastecooking.com/raised-generation-taiwanese-home-cooks-taught-american-kids/?ref=PRHF98BCA535356&linkid=PRHF98BCA535356&cdi=651E3944DEA68C15E0534FD66B0A88A2&template_id=20180&aid=randohouseinc29392-20&cid=136482&mid=2190554754&utm_campaign=taste&utm_source=Crown&utm_medium=Email, accessed 27 February 2021.

²⁴ King, 2019, 60.

between Fu and Li and Dianxi lies in the emphasis on a Chinese *cultural* tradition. Li and Dianxi do work to similarly frame Chinese food “as a cultural product.”²⁵

Their videos seem determinedly apolitical, even when a potentially fraught mention of ethnic minority groups (少數民族 *shaoshu minzu*) arise in the case of Dianxi’s videos, which include several that highlight Yunnan-specific dishes as well as ones that seemingly belong to the Bai (白族 *baizu*) and Dai (傣族 *daizu*) ethnic groups.²⁶ Yet, the issue of government minority oppression or the resurgence of Han ethnonationalism never arises.²⁷ These videos are simply a celebration of the aforementioned “uniqueness of Yunnan cuisine.”²⁸ In her cookbooks especially, Fu avoids any explicit politicking that she exhibits elsewhere, choosing instead to celebrate the culinary diversity of the various regions of China without any reference to the newly-formed PRC and contested claims to the seat of Chinese power.²⁹ The tunnel-vision focus on food emphasizes its cultural as opposed to political nature, and reads as generally Chinese to its audiences.

Within a more contemporary Chinese media landscape, Li and Dianxi can be seen as off-shoots of an emerging focus on culinary media domestically. The most prominent example of Chinese culinary media is the 2011 series *A Bite of China* (舌尖上的中國 *Shejian Shang de*

²⁵ Ibid, 57.

²⁶ E.g., “Delicacies from Shangri-La Highland of Yunnan - Tibetan Dishes,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 12 August 2020,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uStu_sgBW9I&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge; “A Yunnan Cuisine that was Pounded ‘Millions’ of Times - Jing-po Pounded Dishes,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3d6SymZoRE&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge, etc; “Bai People’s Oriental Cheese - Goat Milk Cake.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 10 June 2020,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCgNBR3oOHg&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge; “Dai-Style Beef Ball: A Delicacy Made With Pounding Iron Bars.” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 9 October 2019,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WUGUnAI_Cg&t=88s&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge.

²⁷ This may be seen in the Hanfu Clothing Movement; see chapters one-three of Kevin Carrico, *The Great Han: Race, Nationalism, and Tradition in China Today*, University of California Press, 2017, pp. 16-95.

²⁸ “Everything about Dianxi Xiaoge 滇西小哥.”

²⁹ King, 2019, 62-63.

Zhongguo) that traveled around the country and showed the diversity of Chinese cuisine. The immense popularity of this series represented the “strong growth and rapid transformation in China’s food media and, ultimately, the country’s foodscape in terms of its discursively constructed history, culture, and materiality...[and] the emerging *aestheticization* of food in today’s Chinese media and the effects its representations have in China and around the globe in light of the increasing media attention and commercial interest in documenting Chinese cuisine.”³⁰ Despite the diversity portrayed in the series, the different regionalisms remain encompassed under the umbrella of China, as do Li and Dianxi’s videos. The show also seeks “to highlight the people who appear...and their experience preparing the food as a part of their personal memories, hence contributing to the discursive formation of the aesthetics of common people’s food...[it] aims to transmit traditional Chinese culture to the world by telling stories of the Chinese people.”³¹

The focus on the specific characters in each episode is notable, for they themselves seem to act as hosts for urbanite-tourists participating in a domestic form of culinary tourism to rural spaces.³² Yet, they are simply microcosms of a larger Chinese foodscape and a media narrative that is in the hands of China Central Television (CCTV) producers. Then, it is as if Li and Dianxi’s videos represent a subjunctive for the subjects of each *Bite* episode: this is what the lives of the owners Lanzhou beef noodle shop would be like if there had been the time and space and overhead to show more of their lives. The women’s videos are more complete versions of the

³⁰ Lanlan Kuang, “China’s Emerging Food Media: Promoting Culinary Heritage in the Global Age,” *Gastronomica*, 17.3 (2017): 67.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 75-76; See also Jia-Chen Fu, “Epilogue: Negotiating Past and Future through the Soybean,” *The Other Milk: Reinventing Soy in Republican China*, University of Washington Press, 2018, pp. 177-189.

³² For more about this phenomenon of domestic urban-rural tourism in China, see Jenny Chio, *A Landscape of Travel: The Work of Tourism in Rural Ethnic China*, University of Washington Press, 2014.

Bite episodes.³³ Their self-production also is a social media development from conventional culinary media formats that parallels the move from Food Network to YouTube.

Canonical Culinary Media

This media genre is twofold: first, it encompasses the programming that features a woman in the kitchen teaching an audience how to cook certain dishes such as *Girl Meets Farm*, *The Pioneer Woman*, and any other number of Food Network shows that take their precedence in part from people like Fu Pei Mei and more famously, Julia Child; second, it includes shows that feature a host traveling to other places, trying those foreign foods, and allowing the audience to experience this vicariously, such as *Anthony Bourdain: Parts Unknown* and *Ugly Delicious*.³⁴ These two subgenres are distinct, but related in the ways that they position the onscreen purveyor of the culinary and the audiences viewing this content. Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's content blends these two subgenres in subtle ways that render them distinct enough not to fit comfortably in either category but that nevertheless exhibit the relationships established by both of them.

The Food Network Model

As described earlier, Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos have a particular filming and editing style that positions them in rural, agricultural fields and amongst the beauty of nature. In their use of technology, environment, sound, and editing, they establish this localism as distinct from the viewer in ways that many culinary television shows do not; Food Network programming typically takes place in a kitchen with sleek appliances, warm lighting, swift and smooth transitions between angles and advertisements, and a distinctly homey atmosphere. Food Network personalities are also at the center of the frame as they prepare food, looking directly into the camera and speaking to the audience, either rhetorically or narrating their actions. Li and

³³ "A Bite of China 02 The Story of Staple Food (HD)," *YouTube*, uploaded by CCTV纪录, 9 April 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8ITWruUaQc&ab_channel=CCTV%E7%BA%AA%E5%BD%95; Kuang, 71.

³⁴ "Shows & Schedule," *Food Network*, <https://www.foodnetwork.com/shows>, accessed 7 February 2021.

Dianxi purposefully avoid this kind of (in)direct interaction with their audiences: they rarely break the fourth wall, let alone look straight into the camera lens.³⁵ These differences in the framing of the culinary actors results in subtle but consequential viewing experiences.

On the one hand, the style and framing of Food Network shows allows Ree Drummond to explicitly teach and show viewers how to make the “perfect pot roast” through the step-by-step narration and display of ingredients and tasks.³⁶ The corresponding recipe posted online makes the recreation of this dish even more accessible and easy. On the other hand, even Li and Dianxi’s most popular videos are hardly instructional, at most containing an in-text caption such as “温水清洗 [*wenshui qingxi*, wash in warm water]” with no narration, no explicit listing of ingredients, and certainly no sort of way to replicate their techniques in non-local environment like theirs.³⁷ For Li and Dianxi, while their videos culminate in a family meal, their publicizing of their culinary endeavors represent a shift in culinary media “from being instructional to being entertaining, they are now less about how to cook and more about how to live; as such, they participate in the process of producing proper citizens that results in the accretion of culinary capital.”³⁸ This may also apply to personalities like Drummond or Molly Yeh, whose blog “is a diary about food, farm life, and adventures,” for their shows include as much about their personal

³⁵ Dianxi Xiaoge has several vlog-style videos that are the exception to this: she holds the camera herself and speaks to viewers, narrating her day. At the end of each “normal” video, she does address the audience directly with a greeting and a thank you, but this always occurs outside the culinary narrative of each video.

³⁶ Ree Drummond, “Perfect Pot Roast,” *Food Network*,

<https://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/ree-drummond/perfect-pot-roast-recipe-2118771>, accessed 8 February 2021.

³⁷ “Peanut and melon seeds, dried meat, dried fruit, snowflake cake - snacks for Spring Festival,” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 31 January 2019,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FWMIPukvdsQ&t=338s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi. This video currently has 82.8 million views; “Have you tried Lard-sealed Pork, it’s juicy but not greasy,”

YouTube, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 25 January 2019,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sbr-SAi6PHM&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge. This video currently has 40.5 million views; Ibid, (00:01:30), the English translation is “rinse in mild temperature water.”

³⁸ Peter Naccarato and Kathleen LeBesco, *Culinary Capital*, Berg, 2012, p. 48; See also James Farrer, “Introduction: Traveling Cuisines In and Out of Asia: Toward a Framework for Studying Culinary Globalization,” *Globalization and Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Contact Zones*, edited by James Farrer, Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

lives as they do their food.³⁹ However, Yeh and Drummond do not appear to be solely responsible for their families' sustenance; they have certain economic and cultural resources that at least appear absent in Li and Dianxi's locality.

Even so, both these videos and Food Network shows still “explicitly or implicitly [employ] the discourse of self-improvement. By watching such programming, acquiring the knowledge and skills that it imparts, and using this newly acquired culinary capital in their lives, viewers can affirm their social position and strengthen their sense of self.”⁴⁰ This culinary capital manifests in different ways. For Food Network viewers, they enjoy the knowledge and skills to make a certain dish, the ability to effortlessly navigate a kitchen, and the confidence to assert a kind of expertise conferred upon them by watching these shows. Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's viewers do not gain the ability to recreate their dishes, but rather benefit from a kind of “conspicuous consumption” of other places and cultures.⁴¹ Even though one cannot replicate the way that Li processes grains or folds dumplings, one may boast knowledge and literacy of a more local, genuine form of Chinese food that is distant from the ubiquitous Chinese restaurant. Here, culinary capital is not about technical skill; “what becomes a mark of distinction is not the exclusiveness of one's tastes or choices but rather, an individual's openness to a range of experiences. Those who seek out the greatest variety of tastes and who are open to the broadest range of experiences emerge as the most culturally capitalized.”⁴² Those who can refer to these videos and these local iterations of Chinese food prove their capital through both their willingness to experience new things as well as their very exposure to such things.⁴³ One can be

³⁹ Molly Yeh, “About,” *My Name is Yeh*, <https://mynameisyeh.com/about>, accessed 8 February 2021.

⁴⁰ Naccarato and LeBesco, 48.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴³ Janine Chi, “Consuming Rice, Branding the Nation,” *Contexts*, 13.3 (2014): 51.

open to new and different experiences without having ever experienced them; that one has both experienced *and* remains open-minded is the ultimate marker of culinary capital.

What remains similar across these videos and much of the Food Network programming is the gendered element of culinary authority. With some notable exceptions notwithstanding, the majority of Food Network shows center on a female host in a domestic space showing audiences how to cook an easy dinner for a family of four.⁴⁴ Within the narrative of each episode, they themselves are often preparing a meal for their own families, who make brief appearances at the end of the episode to partake in the food meticulously and lovingly prepared by their wives and mothers.⁴⁵ This narrative style may be traced to notable pioneering of Julia Child for English-speaking Western audiences and Fu Pei Mei for Chinese-speaking audiences.⁴⁶ The positioning of these female culinary personalities as homemakers works to de-professionalize their work, even as they earn their livelihood from producing these shows. We see that Ree Drummond is a “ranch wife and mother of four” whereas Bobby Flay is the “resident grill master.”⁴⁷ Because she is a wife and mother, Drummond is a home *cook*, while Flay is a professional *master*. Even though these women are able to earn money and status as television personalities and culinary celebrities (which often extends to product endorsements and advertisements), a gender divide remains between cooks and chefs, amateurs and professionals, men and women.

⁴⁴ *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives; Beat Bobby Flay*; etc.

⁴⁵ See Peter Naccarato and Kathleen LeBesco, “Television Cooking Shows: Gender, Class, and the Illusory Promise of Transformation,” in *Culinary Capital*, Berg, 2012, pp. 41-66.

⁴⁶ King, 2018, pp. 15-26.

⁴⁷ “Ree Drummond,” *Food Network*, <https://www.foodnetwork.com/profiles/talent/ree-drummond>, accessed 8 February 2021; “Bobby Flay,” *Food Network*, <https://www.foodnetwork.com/profiles/talent/bobby-flay>, accessed 8 February 2021.

This juxtaposition is less present in Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos because they have no immediate male counterparts for comparison.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, their positionality parallels women like Drummond and Yeh in ways that causes this dichotomy to persist. In all of Li and Dianxi's videos, they are the main or sole culinary providers for their families, who are always shown dining together at the end of each video as the culmination of their efforts. Notably, these women highlight the kinds of culinary labor and processes that are absent in Food Network programming: they show the sourcing of their ingredients, the work that goes into butchering meat, and other non-mechanically processed methods of culinary preparation as opposed to mixing pre-chopped ingredients or marinating prepackaged meat.⁴⁹ This difference is interesting in the ways that Li and Dianxi operate inside and outside of a kitchen; they do not just perform culinary tasks inside the house, but they also perform the significant labor required to grow, harvest, and prep their foods outside the house. Furthermore, they are in control of how they

⁴⁸ That is, the women have no male counterparts in the same way that Drummond and Yeh do. One can watch Drummond cook her family dinner before watching Geoffrey Zakarian give a master class on knife techniques. In the case of Li and Dianxi, their counterparts manifest in people like Mr. Tfuue, who builds architectural structures "completely from scratch using Primitive Tools." At the time of writing, he has 4.77 million subscribers on YouTube, where he posts time-lapsed videos of himself digging pools and the like using simple tools such as hoes, picks, and his hands. He has a presence on other platforms like Facebook and Twitter as well. Another example is the channel The Survival, which features two men who undertake similar projects with no automation or other machinery. Parallels can be made to Li and Dianxi less so because of their cooking and more so because of the extreme quality of their lifestyles; their sweaty self-sufficiency; their closeness to the land; and their ironic determination to document this extreme rurality and isolation for YouTube. There is also a decidedly non-Western aspect for all of these media producers that expresses itself visually in the naturalized setting and absence of industrial tools that are often metonymic for Western-style development; the materiality of stone, wood, clay, mud, and bamboo across all these videos is vaguely indicative of some kind of Other, which also comes across in the bodies of the people onscreen, which are all non-white. Of course, their non-whiteness does not preclude the possibility of their being American or European (Mr. Tfuue is "from the United States of America"), though Li and Dianxi are definitely Chinese nationals; it is just that the combination of this kind of labor and environment is already coded as belonging to areas of non-Western development, which are also not white. This is only being reinforced here. In any case, the emphasis on living or surviving off the land, the rural production, and the extreme DIY-ness of these videos provides some kind of analogue to Li and Dianxi's content, and there is some gendered element, for Li and Dianxi mainly work with food while these other male producers build things.

⁴⁹ "The life of wheat! Which is your favorite food made from wheat?关于小麦的一生,你最爱吃哪种面食?" *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 19 May 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b44xja5KeAo&t=359s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi; "Dad's Favorite Dish: Yunnan Preserved Ribs - A Delicacy Discovered Due to Storing Foods," *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 27 January 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b7WsNftGj-g&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge.

position themselves because they self-produce their content, while Food Network producers and showrunners dictate the narratives of *Girl Meets Farm*. Li Ziqi is Li Ziqi; Molly Yeh is the “girl” in *Girl Meets Farm*.

The non-instructory element of Li and Dianxi’s videos also frees them to show all different sorts of dishes and cooking methods impervious to viewers’ ability to do the same at home. Food Network’s entire philosophy lies in instruction; its success is dependent on viewers’ reliance on its recipes.⁵⁰ While there is some veneer or semblance of instruction through these descriptive in-text captions, the informational element of Li and Dianxi’s videos is less focused on viewer’s ability to recreate their dishes and more on their exposure to Chinese food as they present it. In this way, their videos begin to resemble culinary tourism programming, for this genre is more about exploration and discovery.

The Culinary Tourism Model

Many scholars have discussed and broadly understood culinary tourism in different ways.⁵¹ For my analysis of Dianxi Xiaoge and Li Ziqi, I will be working from Lucy Long’s definition of culinary tourism as something that is “the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of an other—participation including the consumption, preparation, and presentation of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered to belong to a culinary system not one’s own. This definition emphasizes the individual as active agent in

⁵⁰ The website claims that “the network strives to be viewer’s best friend in food and is committed to leading by teaching, inspiring, empowering, and entertaining through its talent and expertise.” From “About FoodNetwork.com,” *Food Network*, <https://www.foodnetwork.com/site/about-foodnetwork-com>, accessed 9 February 2021.

⁵¹ “Consuming the Other: Food Films as Culinary Tourism.” *Feasting Our Eyes: Food Films and Cultural Identity in the United States*, by Laura Lindenfeld and Fabio Parasecoli, Columbia University Press, 2017, pp. 175-204; See Casey Ryan Kelly, *Food Television and Otherness in the Age of Globalization*, Lexington Books, 2017; Dixit Saurabh Kumar, editor, *The Routledge Handbook of Gastronomic Tourism*, Routledge, 2019; Lisa Heldke, “Let’s Cook Thai: Recipes for Colonialism,” *Food and Culture: A Reader*, edited by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, Routledge, 2013, pp. 394-408; Jennie Germann Molz, “Tasting an Imagined Thailand: Authenticity and Culinary Tourism in Thai Restaurants,” *Culinary Tourism*, edited by Lucy M. Long, University Press of Kentucky, 2004, pp. 53-75.

constructing meanings within a tourist experience.”⁵² Long details the ways that the object or subject of tourism depends on one’s positionality, the mutual participation in this experience from both host and tourist, and several methods of how these foods are presented and consumed. Culinary tourism (and tourism more generally) also raises questions about some kind of movement; the power dynamics between host and tourist, and authenticity and the construction of this concept.

First, culinary tourism presumes movement to and from a place. This may come in the form of actual travel to another country, dining at an ethnic restaurant, or through the consumption of culinary travel media.⁵³ Typically, this media features a host or guide that takes viewers through these foreign spaces and allows them to vicariously experience and taste these foods with them. Unlike uncharacterized tourism, the culinary guide need not necessarily be a local or have insider knowledge; often he is just as unfamiliar with the foreign cuisine as the viewer is, which creates an affective connection between the two. As David Chang learns about tacos by traveling to California and Mexico and speaking with various food critics and cooks, so too does the viewer.⁵⁴ Chang may be more knowledgeable than the viewer by virtue of his position as a professional chef and restaurateur, but in the context of each episode, he is as much as a neophyte as the viewer. The same is true of Anthony Bourdain, whose role is even vaster in scope and even more reliant on the locals of each place in *No Reservations*. Both men travel in place of the viewer in similar positions of ignorance so that they may learn about and taste these new foods together.

⁵² Lucy M. Long, “Culinary Tourism: A Folkloristic Perspective on Eating and Otherness,” *Culinary Tourism*, edited by Lucy M. Long, University Press of Kentucky, 2004, pp. 20-50.

⁵³ Molz, 53-54.

⁵⁴ “Tacos.” *Ugly Delicious*, season 1, episode 2, 23 Feb. 2018. *Netflix*, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80191117?trackId=14277283&tctx=-97%2C-97%2C%2C%2C%2C>.

While there is a sense of movement in Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos, it is not the same kind of movement that is present in shows like *No Reservations* or *Ugly Delicious*. No physical travel happens in the actual media, and thus no travel happens for the viewer either. Furthermore, Li and Dianxi do not inhabit the same host role that Bourdain and Chang do; they live in the spaces they broadcast to the public; they are locals to their environment and culinary culture. In this way, the women serve less as fellow tourists or culinary connoisseurs helping viewers to wade into foreign gastronomic territory and more as hosts that invite viewers in. In this way, Li and Dianxi's videos are not showcasing the exotic like Bourdain is; instead of leaving the familiar and venturing into the land of the unfamiliar heretofore unknown and therefore non-existent, these women continue to exist as people come and go. When one watches their videos, the transportation is less apparent because it feels like one is already there observing the women at work. The most apparent form of movement that occurs is temporal and developmental because of the implicit (or explicit) juxtaposition between the contemporary, postindustrial world of the viewer and the seemingly preindustrial, vaguely traditional worlds of Li and Dianxi.⁵⁵ In this way, the movement is subtler and less easily identifiable, but it is still there. Though no physical travel occurs in their videos, the dynamics between Li, Dianxi, and their viewers do resemble that of other culinary tourism media.

As locals living in these sites of tourist attraction, Li and Dianxi are not knowledgeable guides or gastronomically accomplished professionals, but instead gain their cultural capital and culinary authority by virtue of their bodies and positionalities. That is, the identification of their physical appearances as Chinese and their positioning as locals *from* in rural China establishes them as the Native Informant, who has, is perceived to have, and is *expected* by outsiders to have

⁵⁵ See chapter two for more about the construction of locality and chapter three for more about the identification of the Other through time.

authentic knowledge by virtue of their heritage.⁵⁶ The role of the Native Informant is important when discussing tourism, whether culinary or other because so often authenticity is a central part of tourist discourse: “many sightseers are motivated by a desire to see the life of natives as it is *really* lived, a desire for truth, intimacy, and sharing the lived experience behind the performed scenes. The touristic (voyeuristic) gaze is...one example of the desire for authenticity.”⁵⁷

Building off previous scholars’ definitions of authenticity will help to better understand the distinctiveness of Li and Dianxi’s content amidst this genre.⁵⁸

The viewers may at first be in awe of this exotic, unfamiliar view of Chinese food.⁵⁹ This quickly transforms into fascination with this more authentic version of Chinese food that is far flung from restaurants (chain or fine dining), urban settings, and industrialized conveyor-belt style production. This identification of authenticity in Li and Dianxi’s videos lies in the contrast they present to the viewer-tourist’s reality; its very exoticism makes it more authentic because this quality is “related to the impact of modernity upon the unity of social existence....since modern society is inauthentic, those modern seekers who desire to overcome the opposition between their authenticity-seeking self and society have to look elsewhere for authentic life. The quest for authenticity thus becomes a prominent motif of modern tourism.”⁶⁰ Additionally, it is the seekers of authenticity—the tourists themselves—that have the power to bestow this quality upon others: “their genuineness is constructed by beliefs, perspectives, or powers [and]

⁵⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Harvard University Press, 1999.

⁵⁷ Shun Lu and Gary Alan Fine, “The Presentation of Ethnic Authenticity: Chinese Food as a Social Accomplishment,” *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36.3 (1995): 539.

⁵⁸ Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value,” *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, edited by Arjun Appadurai, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 3-63; Erik Cohen, “Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 15 (1988): pp. 371-386; Yvette Reisinger and Carol J. Steiner, “Reconceptualizing Object Authenticity,” *Annals of Tourism Research*, 33.1 (2006): pp. 65-86; Jeff Pratt, “Food Values: The Local and the Authentic,” *Critique of Anthropology*, 27.3 (2007): pp. 285-300; Sean Beer, “Authenticity and food experience - commercial and academic perspectives,” *Journal of Foodservice*, 19 (2008): pp. 153-163.

⁵⁹ Molz, 68.

⁶⁰ Cohen, 373.

expectations of the toured objects...authenticity of a tourism setting is not a real property or tangible asset, but instead is a judgment or value placed on it by the observer.”⁶¹ The identification of authenticity stems from the contrast being drawn between producer and viewer, host and tourist; it is not that Li and Dianxi’s Chinese food adheres to any kind of tradition per se, it is that their food and their techniques are distinctly separate and apart from the world of the viewer that matters, a point to which I will return in chapter three.

User-Oriented Media Platforms

Thinking of these women’s viewers as culinary tourists, or more aptly as culinary guests is even more significant than thinking of viewers of Bourdain and Chang as tourists because in this situation, viewers are not tuning in to a program that is necessarily advertised or regularly scheduled.⁶² This means that viewers are either actively seeking out this kind of content, or their previous viewing habits and histories are in some proximity to this kind of content for it to appear in their video feed. In this way, Li and Dianxi’s viewers are more purposefully seeking out certain kinds of tourist experiences; those that are not necessarily as commercialized, advertised, or popularized. Of course, at this point of writing both women’s YouTube channels boast tens of millions of subscribers, with each video garnering millions of views, so one could not really say that they are obscure by any means.

Yet at the same time their content is not featured on more “mainstream” media platforms and remains limited to the “new media platforms” that involve self-producing and

⁶¹ Reisinger and Steiner, 69-70.

⁶² The caveat here is the existence and functioning of the so-called “YouTube algorithm,” but which applies to most all social media platforms that recommend content based on user history and previous interactions with certain types of content. So for example, if one watched many different cooking tutorials about Asian food, or watched many videos about Chinese culture, the algorithm may suggest Li and Dianxi’s videos as something one might be interested in. In any case, one’s viewing patterns would have to be relatively specific for this kind of content to be suggested; Though neither woman has an official schedule for uploading or publishing their videos, they do produce new content on a fairly regular basis. When I say “regularly scheduled,” I refer to the weekly time slots allocated for specific television shows, as well as the tightly-controlled releases of streaming content to which Chang’s *Ugly Delicious* is subjected.

self-publishing, that is, Facebook, YouTube, Weibo, and Instagram. The dispersed and saturated nature of such platforms makes differentiation difficult among media producers and consumers. The user-centric format is also a shift from the chef or celebrity-centric format of more conventional media on Food Network and other places; there is also the added element of more immediate and egalitarian user-viewer interaction on these social media platforms *vis-a-vis* the comment section that often is a free-for-all space for any reactions and thoughts.⁶³

All of these media spaces are essentially extensions of the do-it-yourself or DIY model, albeit a much more polished, pseudo-professional, and sleek iteration of this format, and it actually makes Li and Dianxi's content more relatable than someone like David Chang because all of it *is self-produced*. Despite the endless sea of user-produced and uploaded posts and videos, the novelty of seeing two women harvesting taro roots with machetes, grinding soybeans with a stone-grinder, butchering chickens, and plating colorful and foreign-looking dishes in rural China certainly provides distinction for Li and Dianxi as well as their viewers. But another novelty lies in the fact that they are not restaurateurs, Michelin-starred chefs, celebrities-turned-foodies, or even diner cooks. They are otherwise two ordinary women who have experienced the throes of economic uncertainty and urban migration that many young Chinese have experienced. Of course, the very ordinariness of these women's now self-mythologizing, self-published biographies is what makes them so alluring and captivating to watch. The *Y* portion of the DIY of the growing and making of these foods, of the filming and editing of each video, and the uploading of each post comes across: Li and Dianxi have fairly unremarkable backstories and have also used these platforms that are widely accessible to anyone with an Internet connection; they have done everything themselves, and so represent

⁶³ See Rachel Sugar, "How Food Network Turned Big-City Chef Culture Into Middle-America Pop Culture," *Grub Street*, <https://www.grubstreet.com/2017/11/early-days-food-network-oral-history.html>, accessed 19 February 2021.

success stories for other user-producer-creators.⁶⁴ More pertinent to this discussion of genre, they also represent the rising popularity and transformation of culinary media from something that focuses on a celebrity or personality in a fancy or domestic kitchen produced by legions of executives and assistants to something that is made to appear much more self-sufficient, small-scale, and intimate.

Something that remains the same across all of these media genres is the strategic editing and the selective visuality that inevitably shapes the way the food is portrayed and the way the audience reacts. I will discuss audience reception in greater detail later, but for now it is important to note that whether we are discussing Li and Dianxi's videos or *Everyday Italian*, all these programs "rely...on [some kind of] off-camera staff whose invisible work makes them possible."⁶⁵ In the case of Food Network, it is the legions of cameramen, producers, editors, stylists, assistants, etc necessary to run a large media operation. For *Ugly Delicious* and other shows, it is the cameramen, travel coordinators, guides, translators, etc that produce service-specific content.⁶⁶ For Li, though she gives little information about her production process in interviews, this invisible work includes a three-person team that have been helping her since 2017.⁶⁷ Dianxi's process is more veiled, but as she admits in one interview, it was a learning process for her whole family.⁶⁸ Even without any reference to a team that helps her, there is still the invisible work of cutting and editing together these videos to show a culinary narrative. The differences lie in the degree of self-representation and autonomy involved in this off-camera work: network executives and producers dictate the images of Ree Drummond and

⁶⁴ I must make an addendum of course for the precarious and complex nature of Internet access and censorship in the People's Republic of China, which is much more nuanced than many might think. Suffice it to say, the so-called Great Firewall does not necessarily prevent Chinese nationals from accessing blocked sites like YouTube, but this point becomes moot because both women upload their videos onto Weibo anyway.

⁶⁵ Naccarato and LeBesco, 44.

⁶⁶ That is, Netflix Originals, Amazon Prime Originals, etc

⁶⁷ "Li Ziqi Biography," <https://liziqishop.com/blogs/li-ziqi/li-ziqi-biography-story-age>.

⁶⁸ "Dianxi Xiaoge Exclusive Interview," 00:05:07-15.

David Chang; Li and Dianxi are intimately involved and in control of how they represent themselves onscreen.

Though they may appear to be a simple documentation of two women's farm-to-table, naturalized Chinese culinary lifestyles, there is actually much more at play, and the very fact that so much of the labor, technology, and mediation of these videos is hidden speaks to how this performance of Chinese food is created. In these videos, "images of landscapes straddle the real and the virtual; they gain efficacy and discursive power by virtue of their connection to 'real' spaces, which then are perceived as natural and given. The supposed naturalness of landscape imagery effectively masks the inequalities, imbalances, and tensions existent in the very relationships engendered by the process of visual representation."⁶⁹ In this way, the visuality of this media genre is doubly mediated and performed as something that appears real and natural.

Food for Thought

It is crucial to view Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge within these media genres and culinary landscapes. Their content has antecedents, whether direct or indirect, and they are drawing on the kinds of developments in media and globalization that are occurring across foodscapes and platforms. Now we must analyze the work of Li and Dianxi more in-depth to better understand the iterations and imaginings of Chinese food that they are producing and adding to this culinary discourse.

⁶⁹ Chio, 13.

Chapter Two

The Life of a Video: From Farm to Film

The production work that Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge undertake initially constructs particular ideas about Chinese food through space. The aesthetics of Li and Dianxi's environments with their "open spaces, scenic gardens [which]...together with well-crafted visuals and music, are intertwined with the recurrent theme of an idealized family life" that centers on food preparation and convivial dining.⁷⁰ These images show a utopian world wherein humans are close to nature and to each other utopia for viewers living in comparatively dystopian present, wherein food may or may not be the impetus for family gathering and the convenience of many prepackaged, instant, or easy meal-prep services reduce the labor involved in cooking.

In contrast, Li and Dianxi's spaces are immersed in the natural world as well as in domestic spaces; the blurred boundaries between what is inside and outside in their world enables their work to "take place partially in public," and thus in conversation with other family members and in interaction with the world around them.⁷¹ This juxtaposition is more apparent than in the conclusion of every one of Li and Dianxi's videos, which culminate in a fade-out shot of them happily dining together with their families in the courtyard area, which historically was both "the focal point of family life, the space around the well, [and] a window to the natural

⁷⁰ Sidney C.H. Cheung and Erik K.W. Ma, "Advertising Modernity: Home, Space and Privacy," *Visual Anthropology* 18.1 (2005): 73.

⁷¹ Ellen Oxfield, "Labor" in *Bitter and Sweet: Food, Meaning, and Modernity in Rural China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017) 58.

world, to the sky.”⁷² Physical space establishes the framework for other aspects of Li and Dianxi’s assertion of locality.

There is this saturation of natural space into domestic space, causing a transformation of “the old geography of the locality, which described various items such as climate, soil, and settlement discretely, in isolation from one another, into an analysis of the dynamic engagement between the environment and human culture in a place [and] the weighty role...of the environmental determination of rural space contributed to the constitution of this space as an enduring object.”⁷³ This constructed locality as an object thus becomes something for viewers—those with agency and subjectivity—to act upon and visit. Their wistful comments and longing gaze reifies and idealizes this imaginary as something to be attained and initially praises Li and Dianxi’s work, but ultimately renders their productions as objects and spaces of desire that belong to a specific genre of culinary media that positions viewers and producers as tourists and hosts respectively.

Constructed Locality

The idea of the “local” or “locality” contains many variations depending on the context; it may be politically or geographically bounded, socially and economically defined, culturally and linguistically distinguished, and so on, as many scholars have previously discussed.⁷⁴ However, these parameters are of less interest here than in the way space, time, and images may be

⁷² As Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson remarks, “the home meal reaffirms the family; the outside meal creates, if momentarily, another collectivity.” In other words, viewers recognize the ritual in the reinforcement and strengthening of family or generally social connections that the act of eating together affirms. If they remark with longing or wistfulness or any sort of prescriptive attitude, then it may be inferred that perhaps their own experiences lack this sort of social affirmation and sense of collective belonging, which may be ascribed to many different things. However, the ultimate location of this kind of connection seems to be constantly located in places identified as past in “Chefs and Cheffing,” *Word of Mouth: What We Talk About When We Talk About Food*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014; Francesca Bray *Technology and Gender: Fabrics of Power in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) 84-85.

⁷³ Prasenjit Duara, “Local Worlds: The Poetics and Politics of the Native Place in Modern China,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 99.1 (2000): 20.

⁷⁴ For more about different understandings of locality, see “Mapping the Local” in *Media Localism: The Policies of Place*, by Christopher Ali (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017) 30-49.

manipulated to evoke a sense of naturalness and provoke an affective longing for this aesthetic that *becomes* the local. In other words, locality is an idea that is simultaneously attached and unattached from actual place: there are certain environmental and physical characteristics that are important in establishing something as local, but the specific geographic location is not necessarily relevant. That is, a place may be local whether it is in Nigeria or France or China because locality is “a genre—that temporalizes...space as belonging to another time (different from that of the reader or viewer). Often this time corresponds to the cycles of nature, and the authenticity of the local emerges from this naturalization of space or some other form of primordialism.”⁷⁵ There is a universally local *aesthetic* that is temporally distant and environmentally rural that is more important than actual physical place.

By establishing and constructing a temporal distance, there is a consequent and implicit juxtaposition drawn between those inside the localized space and those outside it. This distinction grows stronger through the local’s emphasis on nature, both literally and through an accordance to seasonal cycles as time markers that contrasts a postindustrial, capitalist, and urbanized time that persists regardless of changes in light, seasons, or harvests. There is also the interplay and coexistence of nature and humanity where the latter must depend on and is at the mercy of the former for nourishment.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the local genre includes every component of foodways, from sourcing and harvesting; processing and preparation; cooking and consuming; and replanting and recycling. One must be involved in every stage, instead of only consuming, blind to the labor behind a food or dish. Again, the contrast is implicit: “diets...in cities [are] sites of consumption but not of food production, [while] “local foods...are created from the foodways

⁷⁵ Duara, 14.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 20; Carrico, 57-58.

that arise from places where production and living are intertwined.”⁷⁷ Significantly, this living off the land that Li and Dianxi show does not arise out of nowhere; they purposefully create a cinematographic narrative that articulates this locality. The trick and the allure of course, lies in the elision or invisibility of these decisions that imbues a documentary-like presumption of truth to these women’s videos.

Li and Dianxi employ the aforementioned characteristics of locality in their videos with the effect that their alimentary and personal lifestyles seem antithetical to or incompatible with certain aspects of modernity—globalization, capitalism, urbanization, (post)industrialization, etc—but actually present an *alternative* to a single conception of how and what it is to be modern. The kind of self-sufficiency and attunement to nature that Li and Dianxi exhibit effectively defines a negative locality for viewers: it is the contrast to certain features of the present that makes it identifiable. That is, there are these visual characteristics that describe this universal locality, but there is also the recognition that this locality is *not whatever this present moment is*. The present need not be specified as long as there is an awareness that the present of the viewer or reader is not what occurs in Li and Dianxi’s videos. This is where these videos become meaningful.

The subsequent perceived incompatibility contributes to the frequent framing of the local in terms of loss or pastness: this nostalgia for “simpler times” or some prehistoric natural time is a product of the modern “understanding of time and space that made the division into ‘local’ and ‘universal’ possible. The nostalgic creature has internalized this division, but instead of aspiring for the universal the progressive he looks backward and yearns for the particular.”⁷⁸ Here, “progressive” refers to the post-Enlightenment teleological view of progress as future-oriented

⁷⁷ Eric C. Rath, “The Invention of Local Food” in *The Globalization of Asian Cuisines: Transnational Networks and Culinary Contact Zones*, ed. James Farrer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015) 152.

⁷⁸ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2011) 11.

and always an improvement upon the present and past.⁷⁹ These homogenizing forces threaten this harmony between man and nature; between a sense of authentic and traditional identity, which the local seeks to preserve and protect.⁸⁰ While reading these ideas of global progress and local authenticity or tradition in conflict with each other is tempting and dramatic, it is more productive to discuss this in terms of multiple modernities.⁸¹

Li and Dianxi's universal locality is not the antithesis of globality, nor is it a prehistoric Eden untouched by outsiders; it is in conversation with all of these issues and is active in the discourse of modernity. It is aware of the kinds of questions and anxieties that modernity presents and engages with them in ways that are similar to ritual. In constructing and visiting sites of locality, physically or virtually, "self and other enter this world of shared action...[and] point to or index the shared world that is their relationship...[which] is constituted by a common 'could be,' by a shared subjunctive."⁸² This understanding of the local as potential is significant, for it could equally be a site of romanticized longing and fetish as well as a site for the reinforcement and affirmation of identity. Either way, the local addresses the problems of postindustrial capitalism and homogenizing globalization by refuting them and offering alternatives. Importantly, one need not literally enact or inhabit locality in order to draw comfort or a sense of authenticity from it; it is enough to engage in various (re)presentations of it to find a sense of alternative identification; "instead of being antimodern or antipostmodern, it...[is an] unfinished critical project of modernity, based on an alternative understanding of temporality, not

⁷⁹ Ibid, 10.

⁸⁰ Duara, 39.

⁸¹ For more about multiple and successive modernities, see Peter Wagner, *Modernity: Understanding the Present* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012)

⁸² "Ritual and Sincerity" in *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, by Adam B. Seligman, et al (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 25.

as a teleology of progress or transcendence but as a superimposition and coexistence of heterogeneous times.”⁸³

As part of this negotiation with global modernity, this universal locality is also bound up in the intertwined concepts of identity, tradition, and authenticity, which reinforce and are reinforced by the local. In terms of foodways, much of this has to do with 1) the aforementioned location of authenticity in natural time and space and 2) the linking of culinary practice to nation and identity. This linkage is a product of many culinary actors and producers that assert a generative relationship between land and food; this food then becomes national when said land is identified as belonging to a geopolitical nation-state.⁸⁴ The previous articulation of a universal locality does not hinder the assertion of any kind of identity; rather, the nonspecificity of this locality allows for those employing it to apply it to their own identities. In this context, Li and Dianxi’s identities as Chinese nationals; the ingredients and names of these foods; the materiality of their things (e.g. bamboo) are all coded as Chinese or Asian in some ways that enables them to transmit the ideas they seem to have about themselves as well as them to graft these ideas of locality onto this Chineseness they present. Their culinary identity then converges with a national identity that serves to assert the particularities of a specific place and people. Indeed, “the movement of goods and blurring of borders notwithstanding, more and more countries propose culinary distinction as a marker of identity...countries vaunt their edible traditions and indigenous foods to promote both tourism and exports...whether or not we actually talk about *terroir*, we seek connections between taste and place.”⁸⁵

⁸³ Boym, 30.

⁸⁴ In the case of Chinese food, we may see this in figures such as Fu Pei Mei and Zhao Yang Buwei, both of whom published prominent cookbooks about Chinese food for Chinese and English-speaking audiences, both of whom were discussed in in the previous chapter.

⁸⁵ Ferguson, 2010, 105.

This relationship between nation, land, and food is multipartite: first, it stakes claims about a national identity (a modern concept, as the nation-state is a marker of modernity). Second, the idea of land returns to this evocation of naturalized environment of the local (of growing and harvesting crops); third, the authenticity located in this naturalized setting “cathect[s] the imagined community of the nation via the locality. It is through the particularity of the local—in the sympathy and nostalgia for it—that an empathetic identification is build in the [viewer]...to identify or redeem some primordial worth from a locality;” that is, the nostalgia for this Other Time and Place (prior to this contemporary present) strengthens collective identification as well as connects this locality to some “primordialism.”⁸⁶ Third, this primordial quality then links to notions of tradition or heritage as “stabilizing and even eternal source[s] of identity. Tradition’s appeal then lies in its simultaneous combination of active identity construction combined with its appearance as a natural, unconstructed reality passed down from one generation to the next.”⁸⁷ The complexity of these interwoven concepts manifests in locality, which is a product of these modern ideas itself, but which is masked by pretty images and supposedly unmediated nature. The otherworldliness of their established locality is the place where viewers travel temporally, but are also lured and invited into by Li and Dianxi, who again are and appear as native inhabitants that play host to the visiting viewer.

Natural, Simultaneous, and Inconvenient Time

Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge use their videos, culinary processes, food products to build this locality. Their production of homegrown and hand-labored foods, rural domiciles, agricultural cultivation, non-automated mechanical technology, vaguely traditional clothing, and blurred boundaries between nature and home all work together to produce an image and idea of

⁸⁶ Duara, 26.

⁸⁷ Carrico, 34.

the local. This naturalized time is most apparent in Li's content, particularly in her "The life of [insert foodstuff]" style videos that document the entire culinary lifecycle of a certain food: Li plants seeds, the viewer sees the seeds sprout and grow into fully ripened crops, Li harvests her food, and finally she prepares different dishes using this foodstuff in different ways. All of these cycles and processes—which take months or a year or more—are compressed into videos that are typically around twenty minutes long. In "Finally, a different title! 'The life of okra and bamboo fence, LOL这次可算有点不一样的标题了! 秋葵, 和竹筒路的一生嘻嘻,'" the video follows Li as she grows okra around a hand-built bamboo fence.⁸⁸ The first part of the video shows Li building a bamboo fence herself: sawing off lengths of bamboo, anchoring them in the ground, wiring the bamboo together, and paving a rock path along the fence. This sequence is sped up, taking a time-consuming and labor-intensive project and compressing it into four minutes. The editing and cut-away shots obscure any sense of how many days this took, and indeed seems to actually deemphasize the amount of real time and labor that Li put into this fence.

The okra portion of the video feels similar. The okra begins as Li takes seeds from dried-up okra plants and plants them in small planters. A time-lapse immediately follows the planting of the seeds, showing the seeds sprouting into saplings. The video then cuts to an upward worm's-angle-shot of blooming trees against a blue sky with an accompanying "二零二零, 清明 [2020, Qing Ming]" caption, indicating the passage of seasons since the planting of the okra seeds ostensibly in the summer of 2019.⁸⁹ Li then transplants the okra saplings into the ground before the video cuts to a landscape shot of green grasses blowing in the breeze with a

⁸⁸ "Finally, a different title! 'The life of okra and bamboo fence, LOL这次可优点不一样的标题了! 秋葵, 和竹筒路的一生嘻嘻,'" *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 7 August 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kPIzBRPezY4&t=467s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

⁸⁹ *Ibid*, 00:04:37-40; Qing Ming refers to the annual Tomb-Sweeping Festival.

caption reading “头夏 [beginning of summer].”⁹⁰ The next shot shows a brief time lapse of a plant stalk growing, followed by interspersed shots of Li doing chores and some of her pets playing; the next marker of time is indicated only by a caption reading “小暑 [slight heat]” followed by successive time lapses that show flowers blooming.⁹¹ The next shot of a sunset contains “大暑 [great heat]” before the video returns its focus to Li as she begins to harvest the fully grown okra.

This compression of plant growth and seasonal changes are present in all of Li’s “Life of” videos, which range from featuring cucumbers, chilis, and taro roots, to roses and cotton. Her presentation of and conformity to agricultural growing seasons indicates a life immersed in and at the mercy of Nature, which implies a premodern temporality wherein human civilization and preindustrial technology could not control cycles of time. The convenience and immediacy of much of the postindustrial Western economy harnesses time to produce commodities to meet the demands of a constantly changing, incessantly moving society where “time is money,” as the saying goes. Time is a flexible and wieldable tool in a modern, postindustrial environment in ways that it is not in Li’s videos; by her adherence and submission to the natural cycles, she invokes the idea of the local imaginary that is premodern: she creates “the native place, the village, the local—all [of which] belong to a temporality different from that of the modern city” anywhere.⁹²

Many of Li’s “Life of” videos do not contain as many textual or legible time indicators as “The life of okra,” instead relying on time lapses of changing weather, moving clouds, and her seasonal clothing to act as the main signifiers of time’s passage. Aside from the actual growth of the plants themselves, these are the only clear indications that time passes, and they are fairly

⁹⁰ Ibid, 00:05:09.

⁹¹ Ibid, 00:05:19-29.

⁹² Duara, 16.

subtle. In contrast to the viewer, Li has no mechanical markers of time. Her use of wooden and stone tools also contributes to her image of naturalism, authenticity, and simplicity that have connotations of the past. Aside from the visual aesthetics and editing of Li's videos, her narrative style also contributes to this sense and "element of pastness....[which] relates closely to the dynamics of repetition. Repetition circumscribes the future in and by the past. It limits an otherwise infinite and uncontrolled set of all possible future events within the frame of a known, specific, particular, and felt (past) experience....it creates....by replicating precisely delineated actions...[and] by doing so, it also re-creates."⁹³ All of Li's videos adhere to the same narrative structure, even those that do not explicitly contain "the life of" in the title: the beginning shows snapshots of her local lifestyle; she harvests all of her ingredients; she carefully prepares and cooks them, then plates and serves them for her and her grandmother. The repetitiveness is soothing for its promise of certainty, and the fact that her processes and routines will be much the same as they have been in the past. The methodical cycles and repetition of her actual culinary processes and her video narratives present constancy and a refusal to change according to the whims and pace of the urban viewer, and actually invites him or her in to the cyclical, lulling, and relaxing rhythms of this local time.

Dianxi Xiaoge does much of the same in her videos, using fade-outs, cuts, and scenery changes to express the passage of time. In her video about Yunnan ham, she shows the processes of drying out and salting ham hocks before cutting away to scenes of nature during this time-consuming step.⁹⁴ Unlike Li, Dianxi does not include time-lapses of growing crops or food undergoing various changes; rather, she uses sped-up shots of nature with captions. After

⁹³ Seligman, et al, 120.

⁹⁴ "Ham, the Soul of Yunnan Cuisine," *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 29 April, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2AlMq-uds84&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge.

hanging the ham out to dry, a landscape shot of the mountains against a sunset flashes onscreen as the overhanging clouds fly past. The accompanying caption says that the ham will “自然风干一年上 [naturally air dry for one year].”⁹⁵ This brief clip barely takes five seconds, while the rest of the ten minutes focus on her meal preparation of the ham. A year-long process of preserving meat in a way that relies on natural exposure to dry air as opposed to quickened mechanical dehydration shrinks to a few seconds: this disproportionate expression of time in Dianxi’s video versus the real time of drying ham complicates the idea and presentation of authentic, natural, and local lifecycles.

Yet, this very expression of local authenticity and pastness through repetition and adherence to natural time and aging processes is dependent on the contemporary technology of film and video editing and the time-lapse. Without this technological capability, a single video would be either impossible or necessarily split into many different segments with each one chronicling the slow growth of crops and the changing seasons. Li’s cooking would be an extremely miniscule part of her overall content, which would not be nearly as enticing, for viewers would literally be forced to watch grass grow. Paradoxically, Li and Dianxi’s temporal positioning of themselves in the past relies on technology that is of the modern present. Their compressions of natural time through their editing distorts time for the viewer, and complicates the duration of the actual passage of time, which is “essentially a continuation of what no longer exists into what does exist. This is real time, perceived and lived. This is also any conceived time, because we cannot conceive a time without imagining it as perceived and lived.”⁹⁶

Yet this idea of lived time and a prolongation of past into present—each day and month of salting meat or the slow growth of peas—that Li and Dianxi would have viewers perceive is

⁹⁵ Ibid, 00:02:24.

⁹⁶ Henri Bergson, “Concerning the Nature of Time” in *Henri Bergson: Key Writings*, eds. Keith Ansell Pearson and John Mullarkey, trans. Melissa McMahon (London: Continuum, 2002) 208.

much more complex and interactive.⁹⁷ This is perhaps most apparent when Li documents the process of making soy sauce.⁹⁸ Li begins by planting soybean seeds, which rapidly sprout before the scene cuts to a landscape shot of a field with clouds moving rapidly overhead; the next shot shows matured soybeans, which then appear fully dried in the next shot with “秋天 [autumn] as the caption.⁹⁹ After harvesting and shucking the beans, Li stores them in a shed as the video fades to black. The next indicator of time appears in the very next shot of a distant sunrise over misty mountains with a “二零二零, 清明 [2020, Qing Ming].”¹⁰⁰ Aside from the upload date of the video, this is the only specific time-marker in the whole video, and it is not even a stable one, for the Qingming Festival depends on the timing of the spring equinox, which changes annually. The actual fermentation process (in which time is the necessary and primary actor) occurs at two different points: the beans first grow mold, shown through a time-lapse, then Li stores the beans in saltwater, textually showing that they “日晒半年左右 [dry in the sun for approximately six months].”¹⁰¹ After the soy sauce finishes fermenting, Li spends the rest of the video cooking with her homemade soy sauce. The entire video is eleven minutes and three seconds long, which is only possible using technology that do not belong to the same temporal or developmental positioning that she has situated herself in; she can only convey her ostensible adherence to natural time cycles through editing.

⁹⁷ “Salted Goose, a cuisine only made possible with time,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 15 January 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1c0CayPwjQU&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge; “Soit goes like...the life of peas!那...只有豌豆的一生了！不是说好“下个视频”你们帮我取标题的吗？” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 27 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iOvJ9Tg_rp4&t=66s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

⁹⁸ “一颗黄豆到一滴酱油传统手工酿造酱油Traditional handicraft. Turn a soybean seed into a drop of soy sauce,” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 4 December 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TtzySUY5Bc&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

⁹⁹ *Ibid*, 00:00:16-22; *Ibid*, 00:00:32.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 00:01:30.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, 00:04:13.

The compression of these months and seasons-long processes into single instantaneities contradicts the reality of the lived, experienced quality of these processes. They are not periods of duration; the small amount of temporal and attentional space spent on these processes as opposed to the ratio of time and focus spent on their actual cooking and presentation time jars the viewer's spatial-temporal orientations, delaying the realization of the amount of effort that goes into these video productions. Though Li and Dianxi seek to show themselves living through this time, their use of time-lapses, interspersed landscape shots, sped-up weather and lighting, and jump-cuts that act to compress these long processes into minutes or seconds actually imbues them with instantaneity, which involves "a continuity of real time, that is, duration, and a Spatialized time, that is, a line which, described by a motion, has thereby become symbolic of time. This spatialized time, which admits of points, ricochets onto real time and there gives rise to the instant."¹⁰²

This symbolic time manifests here internally through the sped-up visuals of plant growth and fermentation, and also paratextually in the ticking seconds of the video clock and the red bar that progresses from left to right on the YouTube interface. The ticking seconds of the bar combined with the video images work together to symbolize the passage of much longer and slower real time and effectively eliminate any sense of duration that Li and Dianxi would have viewers feel. Their videos contain "the tendency to empty [time's] contents into a space of four dimensions in which past, present, and future are juxtaposed or superimposed for all eternity...[and] our need to replace it, in order to measure it, by simultaneities which we count. These simultaneities are instantaneities; they do not partake of the nature of real time; they do not endure."¹⁰³ The feasibility of such YouTube videos requires much editing and paring down of

¹⁰² Bergson, 211.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 215.

extended processes into instantaneities that can be appropriately contained in a fifteen-minute video.

Furthermore, each woman uploads videos fairly regularly. Each video may contain a year or two of crop growth or fermentation, but they may be uploaded a week apart from each other, indicating that they have different projects occurring simultaneously, something that is also masked. The compression of time within each video applies to the actual production of these videos as an aggregate, and the invisibility of this labor illustrates the efforts that these women go to maintain an illusion of unmediated, natural rural living and cooking. Furthermore, the effort and time that goes into filming a single video is also masked, as Dianxi vaguely acknowledges in an interview: “There’s a lot of waiting during the filming process...sometimes a dish doesn’t come out right, so we have to shoot it again. So it takes a long time.”¹⁰⁴ Both of these phenomena complicate the women’s portrayal of themselves as authentic locals engaging in time-honored practices and raises the possibility of reading their videos as fully aware of their engagement with these non-local technologies and genres.¹⁰⁵ This interpretation positions them as taking instrumentalizing these techniques to present a source of both cultural-culinary identification and alterity through their local imagery.

Technology as Fluid

¹⁰⁴ “Dianxi Xiaoge Exclusive Interview,” 00:05:32-50.

¹⁰⁵ A brief note about how tradition or the idea of tradition operates in Li and Dianxi’s videos building off Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 1-14. There is no specific reference made to any Chinese tradition in any of the women’s videos beyond using it as a modifier (traditional dish), nor do the videos make any claims about Chinese history. Historicizing the culinary methods used in these videos is an entirely different project, and indeed, historical accuracy is less relevant here than for the *appearance* of tradition rooted in history. As with their construction of locality, they do the same with tradition through their aesthetics, which appear less developed and thus, as belonging to a previous timeline. The “time-honored” appearance of their practices is only so because of how it looks in each video and because of the ways they use technology and position their gender, both of which will be discussed later in this chapter.

In addition to their playing with time, Li and Dianxi also draw out the different meanings contained within *technology* and the imprecise use of this term with multiple reference points or as a subject with agency.¹⁰⁶ Currently, the term “technology” calls to mind images of automation, smart devices, gene-editing, and artificial intelligence. Aside from material objects, “technology” also denotes some sense of progress and advancement, typically in the realm of science, which is not necessarily limited to the physical world. These “signifieds” may be attributed to “the sudden modernist turn toward...abstraction—the new respect accorded to novel geometric, rectilinear, non-representational subject matter—comported with the markedly abstract, mathematical, cerebral, practical, and artificial (as distinct from ‘organic’ or ‘natural’) connotations of the emerging concept of *technology*.”¹⁰⁷ This abstraction of the concept of technology transforms the things that this term signifies from something physical and concrete to ways of thinking and systems of knowledge. Because of this, it is easy to watch Li and Dianxi’s videos and marvel at the absence of any kind of technology when the opposite is actually true.

Technology—in the sense of tools, mechanical devices, and other forms of systemic control over nature—prevalently features across Li and Dianxi’s videos. When planting seeds, Li uses a hoe to dig trenches; she uses a sheet-grater to grate lotus root; she uses a stone hand-powered grinding machine to grind soybeans before straining the soy liquid through a hand-rigged sieve of hanging cheesecloth;¹⁰⁸ Dianxi uses a hoe and sickle to harvest and clean taro root; she frequently uses a mortar and pestle to mix ingredients or grind spices; she takes a smooth and carved bamboo stalk to inflate and then fill pork liver with spice mix.¹⁰⁹ All of these

¹⁰⁶ Leo Marx, “Technology: The Emergence of a Hazardous Concept,” *Technology and Culture* 51.3 (2010): pp. 561-577.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid*, 571.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid*, 00:01:04-00:01:15.

¹⁰⁹ “金黄的季节，载满了收获的喜悦和玉米的香甜Golden season, full of pleasure[sic] of harvest and sweet corn,” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 6 September 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bZsfEwr9i6I&t=3s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi, 00:00:05-15; “Go through the whole winter with spicy veggies with bean curd paste in a hotpot,” *YouTube*,

moments are examples of their active engagement with and wielding of physical tools as technology. They are simply made using wood, metal, stone, and bamboo as their material components and they are individual entities instead of separate components of an aggregate machine or system, but they still belong to the category of “technology” insofar as they are mechanic devices that transform the natural world around these women.¹¹⁰ While these tools may be simple in appearance to those with a more abstract conception of technology, they are just as innovative as the wheel for their ability to hasten or aid certain human-performed processes.¹¹¹

This may be best illustrated by Li’s videos about sweet corn. This is one of her “Life of” videos, so she shows the planting, growing, harvesting, and cooking of corn, but in this particular video she uses a relatively more mechanical machine as well as her other tools. After she harvests the corn and shucks the kernels using scissors and some sort of wooden half-cylinder, she pours the kernels into a hand-cranked wooden machine that processes the kernels by seemingly removing extra bits of the husk and dirt.¹¹² Whether this task could be accomplished without this device is unclear, but this contrasts the majority of her other videos where she uses one or no tools to complete a task. She uses a wooden rake to spread the corn out on a mat to

uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 2 January 2019,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhkE3e7IT_g&t=60s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi, 00:00:45-00:01:00; Ibid, 00:01:04-01:15; “Food material for various cooking ways-How would you like to eat taro?” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 4 October 2019,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gsrqBHOXvTA&t=100s&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge, 00:00:57-00:01:12; “Making Use of Every Part of the Lotus: Flowers, Leaves, and Roots,” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 11 July 2019,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o33PRJR_yVI&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi, 00:02:09-15; “Known as the treasure house of nutrition: Kuzi (Bitter Berry),” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 11 December 2019,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y0qzz6havG0&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge, 00:05:47-00:06:09; “Making a special dish from the Yunnan Bai Ethnic Group: Cured ‘blown’ pork Liver with Spicy Sauce,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 26 December 2018,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Go4ypAdMT0&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge, 00:00:33-00:01:10.

¹¹⁰ Marx, 567.

¹¹¹ Or to “the extent to which those innovations [can] transform the fundamental conditions of life.” Ibid, 573.

¹¹² “金黄的季节 [Golden corn season],” 00:03:14-25; Ibid, 00:03:26-31.

dry; then shows a time-lapsed clip of her cutting down the grown corn stalks with a sickle.¹¹³ A few scenes later, Li grinds corn kernels in her hand-powered stone grinder.¹¹⁴ The rest of the video contains typical clips of her steaming, mixing, grilling, sauteing, and chopping different ingredients to make a feast of corn-centric dishes. These machines consist of simple materials such as wood and stone and require someone to crank them, which seem to contradict a more abstract and complex definition of *technology*, they are still tools that are useful and practical.

Similarly, one of Dianxi's videos about soybeans illustrates different ways that these two women engage with technology as the definition pertains to physical objects of practical use.¹¹⁵ She harvests soybeans with a sickle; creates a yolk to carry the soybean bundles; and uses a whip-like tool to beat the soybean plants and extract the beans themselves.¹¹⁶ She too uses a hand-powered stone grinder to grind the soybeans, which takes up over a minute of the 13-minute long video; when there are so many components of culinary processes going on in each video, this amount of time given to a single task is notable.¹¹⁷ She also uses cheesecloth and a woven sieve to strain excess water; after preparing the tofu, she returns to chopping, sauteing, mashing, and steaming all the ingredients.¹¹⁸ Aside from these specific moments, both Dianxi and Li use knives, steamers, and woks across all their videos which conforms to *technology* as it refers to simple machines and mechanical tools. Seeing these rudimentary, timeless tools that operate at the behest, and indeed, require human power, rejects the conception of technology as autonomous.¹¹⁹

¹¹³ Ibid, 00:03:41; 00:03:51-00:04:01.

¹¹⁴ Ibid, 00:04:50-00:05:00.

¹¹⁵ "Soybeans - how many ways are there to cook them?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 30 September 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MAnyIINiNe8&t=5s&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 00:02:05-17.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 00:03:27-00:04:30.

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 00:04:54-00:05:04.

¹¹⁹ Marx, 577.

Yet, there are many examples of viewers that do not recognize this as such: on one of Li's videos, someone comments that "her videos make me think about how most humans are so distant from nature, we don't feel what it takes to make something with tools or grow our food. Technology definitely helped us so much but it feels like it made us lose ourselves in the process and drifted us [*sic*] from our natural selves;" another commenter on one of Dianxi's videos remarks "is it ironic that we're watching this on tablets/phones/laptops in our homes or apartments, wishing for this kind of lifestyle?"¹²⁰ Comments like these exist across different videos that do not recognize Li and Dianxi as using technology; they make this distinction between "the *mechanic arts* [which] belong to the mundane world of work, physicality, and practicality—of humdrum handicrafts and artisanal skills—[and] *technology* [which] belongs on the higher social and intellectual plane of book learning, [and] scientific research."¹²¹ Either explicitly or implicitly, these videos draw out these distinctions between different notions of *technology* and how the meaning of this word has changed over time, specifically in Western thought.

Furthermore, the elision of these man-powered tools as technology by viewers further serves to frame Li and Dianxi as resourceful. In the absence of recognizable (read, Western industrial) technology, these women as local inhabitants must rely on their own ingenuity and creativity to make do in this pre-technological existence. As mentioned earlier, the materiality of certain items made of bamboo, the stone grinders, and the metal woks also contribute to the coding of these tools as decidedly past and non-Western, but only vaguely Asian. This local ingenuity in the face of an "atechnological" environment becomes a point of fascination for those

¹²⁰ Leannmonjak. Comment on "The life of a tomato~番茄... ..的一生?" *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_Jx2pB7OZg&t=15s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziq; Edith Stols. Comment on "Paoluda & Spring Roll -- Classic Yunnan Summer Snacks." *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Euv0lE2wzPQ&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge.

¹²¹ Marx, 574.

watching, and it is as if they are encouraged to stay a while in order to “discover” how these women engineer their way around the kitchen. Li and Dianxi’s understanding and use of technology in their videos plays on this slippage in semantics in ways that effectively position them in a temporally distant space.

Gender: Womanhood’s Work and the Female Domain

The women themselves also simultaneously complicate and reinforce conventional ideas about domestic labor and gender roles, which shift depending on one’s cultural perspective. Li and Dianxi are the sole actors in their kitchens and culinary spaces; they alone are responsible for preparing and putting food on the table for their families. There are a few exceptions in Dianxi’s videos for certain foods or dishes that require multiple pairs of hands, but the majority of culinary prep and all of the cooking and serving fall to Dianxi. Li supports herself and her grandmother, and ostensibly has less work to do than Dianxi does for her siblings, parents, and grandparents; regardless, in both women’s videos, their primary roles are as daughters and perhaps sisters; there are no husbands or other partners. This is further emphasized by the claims that both women returned to their families and rural hometowns from the city out of duty to care for sick relatives and disenchantment with urban life.¹²²

Despite the presence of other family members, the amount of work each woman does is substantial and conforms to the ways that “early China...[marked] gender difference...through the category of ‘women’s work’ or ‘womanly work’ (女工 *nügong*), the labor that women of every class were expected to perform.”¹²³ The nonspecificity of *women’s work* leaves room for multiple meanings to arise with many different consequences; while in imperial China, this

¹²² See chapter one for more biographical information.

¹²³ See “Dad’s Favorite Dish”; “A Must-have for Chinese New Year - Pounded Babas,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 23 January 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkxAr-Qeh8U&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge, both in which her family members help her butcher meat or operate the machine to pound rice dough; “Li Ziqi Biography,” <https://liziqishop.com/blogs/li-ziqi/li-ziqi-biography-story-age>; Bray, 184.

designated weaving and other textile work, in modernity the connotations of “women’s work” have shifted.¹²⁴ In the West, this consisted of domestic household labor and child-rearing, and in the early 20th-century, these ideas about modern womanhood took root in East Asia, particularly in Japan and Korea.¹²⁵ While the New Woman was expected to be educated and independent, she was also meant to ultimately raise a family. In Republican China, Western cultural influences and political transitions influenced changes in dress and representations of women and femininity: in Republican artwork, women were idealized and portrayed in the act of *doing*: “the beauties presented for readers to admire are drawn from a wider range of the Republic’s citizenry: farmers, servants, workers, teachers, soldiers, and shoppers...the visibility of the lifelike hand in Republican images symbolizes a shift in consciousness toward a democratic notion of citizenship where individuals are active in doing. Social change is made manifest through display of manual dexterity.”¹²⁶

This new conception of modern womanhood in a new modern Chinese society rejects previous images of secluded, delicate noblewomen of imperial orthodoxy. In contrast, the Chinese Republic embraced new ideas about gender and labor in the building of a modern society and nation. The literature and artistic production of the early 20th-century China showed women “engrossed in their work [who] emerge from the pages as confident, self-directed, capable women. They stand in direct contrast to the passive, helpless, and wistful beauties of the

¹²⁴ Ibid, 186.

¹²⁵ For more about what came to be known as the “New Woman” (*sinyōsōng* in Korean or *shin-fujin* in Japanese), see Jiyoung Suh, “‘New Woman’ and Modernity in Colonial Korea,” *Journal of Korean Studies*, 37.1 (2013); Shoko Higashiyotsuyanagi, “The History of Domestic Cookbooks in Modern Japan” in *Japanese Foodways: Past & Present*, eds. Eric C. Rath and Stephanie Assman (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010) 129-144; Li Guo, “Rethinking Theatrical Images of the New Woman in China’s Republican Era,” *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, 15.2 (2013).

¹²⁶ See “Her Brother’s Clothes,” in *Changing Clothes in China: Fashion, History, Nation*, by Antonia Finnane (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008) 177-200; Louise Edwards, “Liberating the Female Hand” in *Citizens of Beauty: Drawing Democratic Dreams in Republican China* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020) 43.

past...[and show a] new scope for the aestheticized display of the useful and productive hand.”¹²⁷

Li and Dianxi most strongly resemble this version of womanhood, for they not only show themselves actively engaged in agricultural labor and manual culinary preparation, but they also are preoccupied with the high aestheticization and beautification of their work. Although they are doing manual labor, it is always visually pleasing, purposefully omitting any images of viscera that comes with slaughtering animals and butchering meat.¹²⁸ In many instances, Li and Dianxi show themselves doing very intensive, sweat-inducing tasks that illustrate the strength and work that goes into agriculture and that contradicts the educated “New Woman” who runs a clean household and raises children. There is some sort of tacit appeal to *nügong* in order to repurpose it to refer to their work as self-sufficient, filial or family-oriented daughters living off the land.

However, Li and Dianxi simultaneously conform to a cult of domesticity in Western gender politics. This is largely due to the separation of labor that resulted in masculine work performed in public versus feminine work done in private, and “because it did not receive a wage, unpaid labor in the home became defined as unproductive...it is automatically given less importance than both the general work done by men outside of the home for a wage and, in particular, the professional cooking performed by men chefs.”¹²⁹ The professionalization of cooking—its transformation from invisible to wage-earning labor—was only accomplished for and by men, who dominate the restaurant industry and high-cuisine spheres as chefs, while

¹²⁷ Ibid, 45-46.

¹²⁸ This is illustrated very clearly in “Must-eat savory meat stew in the winter!” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 7 January 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xfp06qbO6s&t=1s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi; and “A Unique Way to Enjoy the Pig Intestines: Mixed Tofu and Blood Sausage,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 3 January 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wwTw3yR13IU&t=2s&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge. In both videos, meat preparation is central to the dishes that Li and Dianxi prepare, yet they show none of the bloodiness or messiness involved and in killing livestock and cleaning meat, which would conform to their very nonindustrial, agrarian lifestyles. Everything is always cleaned and pristine.

¹²⁹ Deborah A. Harris and Patti Giuffre, “Home Versus Haute: Gender and Status in the Evolution of Professional Chefs” in *Taking the Heat: Women Chefs and Gender Inequality in the Professional Kitchen* (Rutgers University Press, 2015) 18.

women remain in amateurish home-settings as cooks. Chefs and their culinary innovation and performance are coded as male by default, while any professional culinary status women achieve remains largely relegated to culinary television shows on Food Network such as *The Pioneer Woman*, *Barefoot Contessa*, and *Girl Meets Farm*. While this is a professional sort of culinary occupation, these shows position these female cooks in domestic kitchens in homes with the occasional aside from a family member. Such food shows thus only act reinforce “the broader project of circulating prevailing ideologies of gender and class to viewers who embrace and seek to emulate the lifestyles portrayed by their favorite celebrity chefs” and/or cooks.¹³⁰ Therefore, Li and Dianxi certainly play into Western ideas about tradition or premodern gender roles, but interestingly also illustrate a modern sensibility specific to Chinese 20th-century history where (individual) gender increasingly became secondary to the greater class collective wherein women were empowered to join the broader struggle against feudal traditions, bourgeois capitalism, and Western imperialism.¹³¹

Aside from the temporal situations of Li and Dianxi’s worlds, their environments and physical geography play large roles in constructing a very specific temporal and developmental image of themselves and to a larger extent, Chinese food and Chineseness. Both women live in rural areas of Southwestern China, but the careful positioning of cameras and clips they choose to include (and exclude) create an image of China “as an agrarian, pastoral society by the repeated use of farmland shots...clear blue sky, transparent flowing water, flourishing green plants, and so forth are all woven into a picture that depicts an idyllic China—no exposure to

¹³⁰ Peter Naccarato and Kathleen LeBesco quoted in Packham, Charley. “A Woman’s Place is in the Kitchen? The Relationship Between Gender, Food and Television.” *Food, Media, and Contemporary Culture: The Edible Image*, ed. Peri Bradley (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 201) 85.

¹³¹ For more on the politics and role of gender during Maoist China, see Emily Honig, “The Life of a Slogan” in *Gender and Chinese History: Transformative Encounters* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2015) 185-208; Fan Hong, “‘Iron Bodies’: Women, War, and Sport in the Early Communist Movement in Modern China,” *Journal of Sport History* 24.1 (1997): 1-23.

modernity, no pollution from massive manufacturing, and no vestige from western civilization.”¹³² Dianxi and Li’s videos both contain interspersed wide shots of a natural landscape, which ranges from mountains to fields of grain or flowers, as well as extreme close-up shots depicting the details of flowers, flying insects, and water flowing over stones. The frequency of these images as well as their sequential role in breaking up segments of the women working or cooking establish these women as immediately immersed in nature that is different from the urban viewer and the non-Chinese (PRC) viewer.

In addition to the images of Li and Dianxi’s natural rural surroundings, the architecture and space of their actual homes and kitchens is distinctly Chinese. The physical construction of each woman’s home frames a courtyard, with abundant open windows and doorways that allow the inside of their homes exposure to the outside. This kind of style blurs the line between a domesticated structure and organic nature in ways that at once forge a strong connection between these women and the natural world and adheres to a historical and traditional Chinese understanding of the house and home as “a culturally specific experience of space, giving prominence to certain activities, providing certain vistas, certain aesthetics. The house marked a separation from the undomesticated world, and yet it maintained links with what we might call ‘Nature’ in a distinctively Chinese way.”¹³³ There is a distinct and strong link between the sustaining force of nature and this space of human civilization. The natural materials of wood and stone also asserts a traditional use of available and affordable resources as well as acts to further integrate the space of the home in the space of nature.¹³⁴

¹³² Grace Yan and Carla Almeida Santos, “‘CHINA FOREVER’ Tourism Discourse and Self-Orientalism,” *Annals of Tourism Research* 36.2 (2009): 306.

¹³³ Bray, 61.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

The social components of Li and Dianxi's videos are also significant for the ways that they construct locality. In Li's videos, there is very little sense of nearby neighbors or a surrounding community. There are a few moments spread across many videos where Li works with other laborers, but they are so rare that Li continues to exist in isolation and self-sufficiency. In contrast, Dianxi seems to live in closer proximity to other people, as seen in shots of her walking past clusters of buildings and other people working. Her interactions with others also receive more attention, as in her video about making cheese from goat milk.¹³⁵ Either way, both women portray a strong sense of self-sufficiency and separation from any broader community, and effectively create an Edenic space untouched by others. Their portrayal of space is one that is private and idyllic that shifts away "from the material need of accommodation to the pursuit of quality of living," which garners an extremely affective response from viewers.¹³⁶ In the comments section of "The life of cucumbers 黄瓜的一生," a viewer remarks that Li's video "is magical, it looks like she lives in a fairy tale [*sic*] away from all modernism, technology and pollution, this is heaven on earth. I think all humans should live this way, it's the healthiest ever and so peaceful."¹³⁷ In another video, viewer Aesthetic Plants says that "deep down I know this is how life is supposed to be lived."¹³⁸ Viewer Kathy Wu writes that "真的很不错！不知道莲藕还有这么多的吃法！影片的风景也很美赞 [Really, very good! I didn't know that there were so many ways to eat lotus root! The video's scenery is also very beautiful! Good job!]."¹³⁹

¹³⁵ "Bai People's Oriental Cheese."

¹³⁶ Cheung and Ma, 72.

¹³⁷ "The life of cucumbers 黄瓜的一生," *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 20 July 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi38cQMOROY&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi; Sam Pharma, comment on "The life of cucumbers 黄瓜的一生," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oi38cQMOROY&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

¹³⁸ "It's that season when the fruit and vegetables are too many to eat, such a headache~," *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 4 August 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICixvZAc-tE&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

¹³⁹ Kathy Wu, comment on "Lotus Root Powder - The Nutritious Summer Delicacy in Lotus Pool," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TrWx_or7prs&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge.

Comments like these are evidence of the successful ways that Li and Dianxi position themselves as developmentally premodern and temporally in the past; as free from the ills of contemporary society and existing in some imagined ideal human condition.¹⁴⁰

Social Media Platforms

Aside from the internal narratives about technology, gender, and time that are at work in constructing locality, Li and Dianxi must also engage in the online platforms that they use to post and broadcast their videos. Both women have multiple social media profiles where they upload their videos, but the sources of their main non-Chinese (PRC) and Chinese audiences are YouTube and Weibo respectively.¹⁴¹ The user-oriented nature of these platforms is important because any editing, framing, and filming decisions are incumbent upon the subject of each video; everything is entirely self-produced, self-edited, and self-published. Rather than having other producers or executives choosing how to frame these images into a narrative and how this narrative positions the onscreen persona—which leaves these personas to the mercy of others—Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge have control over how they portray themselves to their audiences. They have complete control over what kinds of videos they upload to their social medias because of the DIY nature that is built into these spaces. Stars are also creators and also directors who have agency in how they present themselves to others, whether that means filming more scenes or cutting footage, and how these platforms will mediate their personas.

Furthermore, the user-oriented quality of these social media platforms applies to viewers as well as creators. This user focus deemphasizes celebrity or professionalism in favor of a more egalitarian format that allows anyone to browse and view anyone else's uploads. Thus, anyone

¹⁴⁰ Comments like this can be found on every single one of Li and Dianxi's videos; most are in English, but there are also comments in Korean, Russian, Japanese, etc as well as people "saying hi" from various different countries. For more about such comments and reception, see chapter three.

¹⁴¹ They also have profiles on Facebook and Instagram that largely serve as alternative entry points for the longer videos they post on Weibo and YouTube.

can ostensibly view Li and Dianxi's videos, which makes the host-tourist relationship all the more pertinent.¹⁴² Because anyone can view these videos, in addition to any other video, it is even more necessary for creators to make enticing content to lure viewers into watching and into becoming a vicarious participant in their videos. Li and Dianxi do this very successfully, and so become twofold hosts: they are culinary hosts for tourists seeking to learn about this version of Chinese food and they are media hosts for social media users scrolling through YouTube and Weibo. Yet, there is also another relationship at work that is different from the host-tourist that becomes more apparent when examining viewer reception of Li and Dianxi's videos.

¹⁴² The selectivity of the YouTube algorithm and the potential greater cultural capital of Li and Dianxi's viewers was discussed in the previous chapter.

Chapter Three

Fant-Asia: Consuming and Viewing the Other as Commodity

The ideas about time, gender, work, and technology that Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge create when they film and upload their videos relates to how they produce their content and what they are trying to do with it. From this lens of production and from the perspective of the women themselves, these videos attempt to educate others about country life and food sourcing.¹⁴³ As Dianxi says in an interview, “[all the videos show] dishes I grew up with. There are some dishes I eat often but don’t really make myself, so I’ll often ask older people for advice or go into their kitchen and watch them make it.”¹⁴⁴ Dianxi is clearly trying to transmit information about local Yunnanese cuisine and culture through her videos, which in turn are made more authentic and sincere in her revival of her childhood meals and her appeals to elder generations with ostensibly greater cultural and culinary knowledge. Li also states that “when I worked in the city, it was about survival. Now when I work in the countryside, I feel like I’m truly living...[and] I simply want people in the city to know where their food comes from.”¹⁴⁵ For her, she feels a similar sense of duty to educate city-dwellers about local food-sourcing more generally, as well as document what a life truly-lived looks like. These aims lend themselves to the dynamics of a host-tourist relationship, which they successfully leverage in their construction of locality through all of the aforementioned ideas. They act as knowledgeable hosts and/or native informants for viewers-turned-travelers that are welcomed in to their worlds of temporal pastness and rural pastoralism.

Yet, there is another side to this relationship, *i.e.*, that of the viewer, who has a different relationship to these videos than Li and Dianxi do. From a viewer perspective, there are different

¹⁴³ See chapter one.

¹⁴⁴ “Dianxi Xiaoge Exclusive Interview,” 00:04:42-05:06.

¹⁴⁵ “Exclusive Interview With Li Ziqi,” 00:02:04-10; *Ibid*, 00:02:23-28.

points of emphasis in these women's videos, which ultimately manifests in the dynamics of a consumer-commodity relationship; this is complementary, but not identical to the host-tourist interaction that occurs from the perspective of Li and Dianxi. This second relationship arises out of the ways that viewers respond to the extreme visual aestheticization of foods and the fetishization of these culinary processes; the resulting gastroporn becomes an object of consumption rather than a site of travel. The images of natural tranquility, countryside living, vaguely ethnic music and clothing, and the creation of a sense of "tradition" becomes a product for the cosmopolitan viewer looking to accumulate cultural and culinary capital to consume.

Filming Food, Viewing Porn

The primary way that Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos become commodities is through their editing style, which creates sumptuous and highly aestheticized images of Chinese food for viewers to enjoy visually, auditorily, and gastronomically. The style of their videos becomes less about local food-sourcing and more about the beauty and succulence of each dish as they serve it to the camera and to their families. These kinds of mediated images are food pornography because they contain "the fetishization of food and its coalescence with desire by styling culinary offerings through the vantage point of the camera lens to be consumed by hungry publics. This food is meant to be consumed by sight and other senses...evoking our hidden desires while highlighting its unattainability. Its pornographic quality removes food from the mundane and ordinary, elevating it to the level of the pornographic."¹⁴⁶ Here, "fetishization" refers to the sheer amount of dedication, attention, and time that Li and Dianxi spend to preparing, cooking, and then arranging each dish; the camera's close-ups of each finished dish; the semi-visible amount of time spent filming and producing each video; and the sensual desires

¹⁴⁶ Yasmin Ibrahim, "Food Porn and the Invitation to Gaze: Ephemeral Consumption and the Digital Spectacle," *International Journal of E-Politics*, 6.3 (2015): 2.

that these food images elicit, that is, feelings of hunger, phantom smells of cooking food, and watering mouths.¹⁴⁷

These sensory elements are at the forefront of all Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos. In every cooking portion of each video, the camera shows the women working in the kitchen before gradually zooming in closer and closer on the actual ingredients; the frame of each shot moves from showing Li and Dianxi to showing only their hands working, then to their kitchen tools and the ingredients only. Every video also includes clear sounds of cooking, such as running water, sizzling oil, chopping knives, clinking dishes, etc; the simple background music, which is often only a single instrument playing a simple melody, which serves to add a more cinematic narrative quality to the videos without overwhelming these homey, culinary sounds. In “念念不忘的是小时候那芋香弥漫的味道--芋头饭 Unforgettable Childhood Memory - the smell of cooked taro - (Taro Rice),” the sound of freely running water evokes a river or stream; that it comes from her bamboo-pipe spout is surprising.¹⁴⁸ Later, in the kitchen, the sound of her chopping taro is combined with closeups of the food. The next sequence of her mixing the various ingredients together cuts out her presence entirely, focusing only on the chopsticks at work in the bowl.¹⁴⁹ The viewer sees the food and hears the soft clink of chopsticks against the bowl without any sense of what Li herself is doing, which heightens and emphasizes the sensory input and experience. In another video, the camera shows Li in profile crushing ginger roots with the flat of her knife before cutting to a close-up of her chopping the ginger that only contains the

¹⁴⁷ For more on the invisible labor and the compression of time that occurs in these videos, see chapter two.

¹⁴⁸ “Unforgettable Childhood Memory - the smell of cooked taro - (Taro Rice),” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 13 October 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A3dv9NYrkUE&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi, 00:01:13-23.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 00:01:35-45.

ginger and the moving knife. The knife makes percussive sounds against the cutting board as the ginger pieces become smaller and smaller.¹⁵⁰

Dianxi's videos exhibit similar characteristics. While preparing vegetables to go into homemade chili sauce, Dianxi also has a chopping montage that zooms in on the chilis and garlic as she too demonstrates her knife skills.¹⁵¹ She then adds all her diced ingredients into a mortar and pestle, which produces a satisfying pounding sound of culinary work and a combined mixture; as she adds soy sauce and other wet ingredients, the sounds change from percussive bangs to sloshing, oozing sounds that are visceral but enticing.¹⁵² The accompanying visual is appropriate, focused on the gooey emulsion of the chilis, garlic, salt, ginger, and soy sauce in the pestle. This audiovisual immersion continues as she pours oil and garlic into her wok, creating very loud sizzling and frying sounds while the camera gazes upon her work.¹⁵³ In this video, sound works in affective ways to invoke familiar sounds and senses of the kitchen. Everyone can relate to hearing these noises, yet these videos also draw them out, amplifying their volume and presence in ways akin to ASMR that heighten the viewer's sensory reaction.¹⁵⁴ The amplification of sound accompanies the magnification of the food images. As Dianxi makes tofu sheet snacks,

¹⁵⁰ “In the cold winter, eat ginger, can warm the whole day/正直寒冬, 吃点生姜, 就能暖和一整天!” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 23 November 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGpHXodJ4xY&t=454s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi, 00:02:26-30.

¹⁵¹ “Have you tried the chili sauce that uses soy sauce as a main ingredient?” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 12 December 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5L7ORgtX6o&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge, 00:01:38-47.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 00:02:33-45.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 00:03:12-20.

¹⁵⁴ ASMR, also known as autonomous sensory meridian response, is a sensory response to certain satisfying or intensely detailed or magnified sounds. The actual neuroscience or physiological response matters less than the reference to the Internet trend where people post ASMR videos or clips of them doing anything from chewing carrots to crinkling a piece of paper. These videos are quite popular and really draw viewers' auditory fixation on extremely specific sounds that are often commonplace; See “蒜的一生, 实在想不出有创意的名字了! 下次你们帮我想! The life of garlic~” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 13 April 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcShBujgsIQ&t=413s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi, which contains a sequence where she pours water, soy sauce, and broth, and squeezes garlic cloves and drops ingredients into a bowl, eliciting very loud liquid sounds that evoke either running water, or various bodily functions.

the video progressively cuts to closer and closer shots of the wok, the steamer baskets, the tofu, and the frying oil and spices in the wok as the sound increases.¹⁵⁵

This quality likewise manifests in Li's videos; the viewer's gaze in both is never head-on and it moves increasingly closer to the object of desire, which shifts from the video in aggregate to the food. The editing and "pacing of the video narrative structures attention, lingering most on the food object itself, interspersed with a minimal amount of narrative storyline, culminating in a drawn-out finale of tasting ecstasy...[through] the demonstration of unattainable technical culinary skills."¹⁵⁶ The narrowing of the field of vision until only the food occupies the frame causes everything else—the tilling of seeds, the harvesting of crops, the washing and chopping, the physical labor of these women—to disappear. A completed dish is served not only to the women's families, but to the viewer, who is always allowed to partake first via the camera.

Aside from the visuality and audiography, the instrument, that is, the camera, of these videos is arguably the most consequential factor in shaping the viewer experience and reaction because camera lens becomes elided with the viewer's gaze. Though the viewer ultimately does not have a choice in where or how they observe these processes, they identify with the camera that hungrily devours these culinary images and ogles the private spaces of these women. All of Li and Dianxi's videos are tightly edited with sharp cuts between scenes of nature, harvesting plants, the women working in the kitchen, and the food, and subsequently give no sense of the time it takes to film a shot, adjust the camera, or any of the other cinematographic processes. Consequently, the videos "obscure the process that creates the image, leaving the audience with

¹⁵⁵ "Childhood Snacks - Which one impressed you the most?童年小零食--你印象最深的是什么?" *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge, 15 July 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbnDXHH2My0&t=246s&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge, 00:03:20-41.

¹⁵⁶ Erin Metz McDonnell, "Food Porn: The Conscious Consumption of Food in the Age of Digital Production" in *Food, Media, and Contemporary Culture: The Edible Image*, ed. Peri Bradley (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016) 242.

an unknowingly false sense of reality.”¹⁵⁷ Though the viewer ostensibly views the entire culinary process, unbeknownst to her, things inevitably become obscured through the editing process, including the real passage of time needed to grow, ferment, or store various ingredients, and, more consequentially, the physical and cultural context in which these women exist.

The camera also promotes the viewer’s visual voyeurism, desire, and consumption through its own angles and positioning. This is most apparent in Li’s videos: in all of her “The Life of” content, there are moments where she returns to her courtyard after harvesting the fully matured crops. The viewers see her walking in the background, but her actual figure may be blurred while the camera focuses on a plant or insect; she may also be doing some kind of task.¹⁵⁸ The act of focusing on a small object in the foreground while leaving the main actor-character-performer as an indistinct form in the background establishes a visual juxtaposition and reminds the viewer of his or her position as audience, as well as situating viewer as one peeking around corners to get a glimpse of Li and her work. In one video, she spreads shucked corn kernels out on a mat, while the viewer’s focus remains on a basket of corn cobs sitting on a window sill; the viewer *vis-a-vis* the camera gazes out a window, around a corner to watch.¹⁵⁹ This kind of shot is pervasive throughout Li’s videos, and simultaneously invites the audience to gaze while also reminding them that they are peeking into a private space

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 246-47.

¹⁵⁸ In “(豆芽) Long, tender and fresh: bean sprouts are nutritious and pollution-free,” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒 Liziqi, 18 January 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zSlsmjc4Idg&t=134s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%A0%E6%9F%92Liziqi, 00:02:01-13, Li can be seen blurred in the background lounging on a swing while the camera focuses on a watermelon in the foreground. Li then walks towards the camera and comes into focus as she picks the watermelon; See “Changbai Mountain Ginseng Honey: While all other Ginsengs are Bitter, I am sweet,” *YouTube*, uploaded by 李子柒Liziqi, 13 August 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yx4JnDez1sk&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%A0%E6%9F%92Liziqi, which opens with shots of bees, honeycombs, trees, sunlight through branches, etc; there are also shots of flowers and fungus interspersed throughout.

¹⁵⁹ “金黄的季节 [Golden corn season],” 00:04:11-15.

and a private life; these moments render the camera-viewer's gaze as transgressive in an intimate space.

Though the camera does narrow its gaze to eventually exclude Li and Dianxi from the visual frame, the viewer cannot so easily separate product from producer; part of the fetish comes from the way that these foods were made by *hanfu* or *hanfu*-adjacently clothed women in supremely non-industrialized ways to feed their families in the Chinese countryside. Part of the viewer's pleasure derives from not just the consumption of the perfectly arranged food, but also the fantasy of the methods used and lifestyle employed to achieve this food. The high aesthetics of the food and the environment “evokes intimacy and draws the gaze, and it is from this connection that metaphor and symbolic meanings are activated. Seemingly realistic representation becomes a rhetorical tool of persuasion, where pleasure is activated through the apparent presentation of ‘truth,’” and the saying that “phone eats first” becomes a reality: the phone or camera is allowed the first “bite” or view of the food before the diner herself, and here, the camera elides the viewer allowing them the first taste.¹⁶⁰ Thus, the way that viewers approach these videos is that of one consuming a food product: these because of their editing style, these videos are no longer sources of information about local Chinese food culture, but instead fetishized objects to be consumed, savored, and enjoyed vicariously through the non-alimentary senses.

Commodities for Cosmopolitans

Aside from the sensory consumption of Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos as food pornography, this dynamic of consumption also manifests when viewers approach the videos as a means of accruing cultural and culinary capital. Culinary capital is analogous to cultural capital in that its accumulation is “intricately linked to economic capital and the class-based hierarchy

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 314-15.

that it supports...[it] also serves as a bellwether for a range of prevailing attitudes about race, gender, sexuality, and ethnicity.”¹⁶¹ The more cultural and culinary knowledge one has about a variety of food practices, dietary patterns, gastronomic history, and the refinement of one’s literal tastes all confers higher social, economic, and cultural status, which is important for the cosmopolitan subject who is assumed to be proficient in other tastes and cultures. The cosmopolitan has high culinary and cultural capital that grants them the ability to navigate multiple spaces and e/affectively become a “global citizen.”¹⁶² Therefore, in order to become a cosmopolitan subject, one must go in search of those things that will contribute to their cultural capital, such as experiences and education. In the case of culinary capital, this refers to an open palate, a knowledge of “good” food, fluency in proper eating etiquette, awareness of “ethnic” foods, etc.

While becoming a global citizen may seem appealing, in the quest to achieve this one actually turns a capitalist gaze towards others. Learning about other cultures and foodscapes becomes less about knowledge or enrichment and more about the co-option and consumption of these things-turned-commodities to generate greater capital. Thus, the quest for cosmopolitanism and the accruing of culinary and cultural capital “reflects the...multicultural and cosmopolitan ethos of contemporary neoliberal globalization...the construction of a delightful world of digestible cultural experiences renders the practice of consumption a progressive endorsement of multiculturalism.”¹⁶³ In other words, in the name of learning about local Chinese food culture,

¹⁶¹ Peter Naccarato LeBesco, 7.

¹⁶² The social media centered spaces of these videos contributes further to this sense of cosmopolitan global hybridity and citizenship precisely because it enables frequent and multiple encounters between different people and places. For more about this, see Bree McEwan and Miriam Sobre-Denton, “Virtual Cosmopolitanism: Constructing Third Cultures and Transmitting Social and Cultural Capital Through Social Media,” *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication* 4.4 (2011), pp. 252-258.

¹⁶³ Kelly, 7.

viewers may actually be consuming these videos as cultural commodities that will bolster their own social status.¹⁶⁴

Although both Li and Dianxi have millions of viewers, they are not ubiquitous names or cultural references in the same way that Julia Child was, or that other contemporary celebrity chefs or well-known cooking programs such as *Masterchef*. It is precisely their relative obscurity that lends themselves to being objects of culinary capital because it requires a certain level of culinary, culinary, and Internet fluency to 1) access or find these videos, and to 2) familiarize oneself with the ingredients and techniques the women use to be able to talk about them. Additionally, another factor that makes Li and Dianxi's videos good candidates for cosmopolitan commodities stems from the location of authenticity in their culinary processes, which again, relies heavily on viewer interpretation.

As discussed in the previous chapter, authenticity is largely a construction made by those who are seeking it; thus, there may be many different ways to characterize Chinese food as “authentic.” In this case, much of the authenticity of Li and Dianxi's culinary processes derives from their positioning of locality and the consequent comparison of their positioning with that of the viewer.¹⁶⁵ Cosmopolitans seeking to further distinguish themselves from the from the parochial masses will immerse themselves more deeply into certain aspects of other cultures which denote knowledge and awareness of political correctness that asserts their intellectual and cultural capital. In the case of Chinese food, this once might have manifested as physical travel to China to sample dishes, or a willing and eager venture into a Chinatown chop suey house.

¹⁶⁴ I previously discussed the possibility of Li and Dianxi's viewers being more familiar with Chinese food in chapter one. The same holds for this argument: ostensibly, those who watch have actively sought out some form of “authentic” Chinese food or who have viewing histories that cause various search algorithms to suggest this kind of content. While it is unclear exactly what would cause these algorithms to suggest Li and Dianxi's videos, there is a likely chance that for both Chinese and international viewers, some previous interest in and baseline knowledge about cooking, food, Chinese food, Chinese culture, farm-to-table living, etc would lead them to Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge.

¹⁶⁵ See chapter two for more.

However, as Chinese food has become a ubiquitous presence and a “global cuisine—both in a generic form that exists especially as a global cuisine,” cosmopolitans now long for a “more ‘authentic’ regional versions prepared for cultivated global palates,” which now exists in hole-in-the-wall restaurants in the United States and in less urbanized, Westernized places in China.¹⁶⁶ As “cosmopolitanism increases...local...identity asserts itself in consumption located affectively in gastro-nostalgia. In this globalized state of reterritorialization, imagination and fantasy become...‘the real thing.’”¹⁶⁷

The “real thing” is food which is untouched by industrialization. It is food which returns to its literal and figurative roots, purveyed ethnic bodies in imagined rural spaces and real geopolitical boundaries. Authentic Chinese food is the purview of figures like Li and Dianxi, whose videos “provide audiences with a glimpse of [a] previously unknown, exotic culinary lifestyle, where food served...reflect[s] desires rather than norms.”¹⁶⁸ There is some exoticism inherent to the allure of Li and Dianxi’s videos, which show Chinese food in a way that is completely new and entirely foreign: their emphasis on farm-to-table and manual labor processing of their dishes present a sharp contrast to the restaurant-prepared, reheatable frozen dishes of immediately familiar or previous iterations Chinese food.

The beautiful landscape shots; stone, wood, and iron tools; the homegrown and homemade aliments; and the rural setting devoid of urban, contemporary life is alluring for viewers. That allure “is rooted in the circuits of a (trans)national nostalgia for a landscape that appears to embody, nourish, and sustain a more fundamental relationship between nature and

¹⁶⁶ Craig Calhoun, “A Cosmopolitanism of Connections,” *Cosmopolitanisms*, eds. Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos Horta (New York: New York University Press, 2017) 192; Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Tulasi Srinivas, “‘As Mother Made It’: The Cosmopolitan Indian Family, ‘Authentic’ Food, and the Construction of Cultural Utopia,” *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2013) 367.

¹⁶⁸ Nathan Taylor and Megan Keating, “Contemporary food imagery: food porn and other visual trends,” *Communication Research and Practice*, 4.3 (2018): 311.

human society...the resulting landscape is constructed to be generic enough *and* specific enough to satisfy the foreign tourist's desires for the exotic, [and] the national urban dweller's longing for a 'simpler life.'"¹⁶⁹ It is also significant that outside viewers tend to identify authenticity in the local and rural; in whole, homegrown ingredients; and in nonindustrial processes. As more consumers adapt alternative macro-oriented diets and obsess over all-natural, non-GMO products, it is people and producers like Li and Dianxi that contrast "the natural, health-enhancing traditional Eastern ways with the health-destroying ways of the mechanized West," or any other industrialized, urbanized setting.¹⁷⁰

The completely hand-labored and homemade farm-to-table dishes of Li and Dianxi are representative in some ways of the concept of "slow food," which espouses a "negative polemical stance toward the idea of speed and its material manifestations, such as fast food [and] a...program for everyday living associated with valuing 'pleasure, authenticity, connectedness, tranquility, and deliberation.' Slow Living...is a direct response to the processes of individualization [and] globalization."¹⁷¹ While not included in the canon of the "official" Slow Food movement, watching these women's videos, leaving comments on them, and name-dropping them acts demonstrates one's "resistance to global capitalism, agribusiness, monocropping, multinational corporate monopolies, environmental degradation, and cultural imperialism."¹⁷²

A desire to practice and display these virtues reveals a desire for social differentiation through the obtainment of cultural capital; the consumption of these videos signals the

¹⁶⁹ Chio, 10.

¹⁷⁰ Liz Wilson, "Pass the Tofu, Please: Asian Food for Aging Baby Boomers," *Culinary Tourism*, ed. Lucy Long (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2004) 249-250.

¹⁷¹ Alison Leitch, "Slow Food and the Politics of 'Virtuous Globalization,'" *Food and Culture: A Reader*, eds. Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik (New York: Routledge, 2013) 418; The women use slow living to help establish the locality in their videos, as discussed in chapter two.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 254.

obtainment of another kind of cultural capital, that is, one of authentic Chinese cuisine and Chineseness *that they qualify as authentic*. They recognize that these women's lifestyles are, at the very least, completely different from the fast-paced West; their displays of foreign-looking vegetables, countryside, peasant and *hanfu* clothing, and physical appearance are familiar enough to be recognizably Chinese; thus, they have some sort of culinary, cultural, and moral authority and authenticity over the Chinese food that exists elsewhere. One's ability to refer to them is evidence of one's status as a cosmopolitan consumer of other people, places, cuisines, and cultures.¹⁷³ As one's cultural capital increases, so too does one's status as a worldly cosmopolitan subject able to navigate different cultural spaces and registers and most importantly, to recognize one's own navigation of those spheres.

Comments from the Peanut Gallery: Viewer-Consumer Reactions

The vicarious consumption of this authentic Chinese food extends toward Li and Dianxi's videos in aggregate because of the way that food media(s) "extend the social customs associated with food consumption by forging, in visual form, meanings as well as personal and cultural identities."¹⁷⁴ In culinary media, food becomes a symbol for and microcosm of a historical, national, and cultural identity, and as previously mentioned, creates affective viewer participation in consuming the food and gazing into a private process that has been published online. Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge and their videos are especially significant for they way they present a certain kind of Chinese food to increasingly international audiences in a globalized, constantly moving

¹⁷³ See Johan Lindell and Martin Danielsson, "Moulding Cultural Capital into Cosmopolitan Capital: *Media practices as reconversion work in a globalizing world*," *Noridcom Review*, 38.2 (2017): 52-64. In it, they discuss media's promotion and enabling of cosmopolitanism at length. Through Internet spaces like YouTube, more and more people have the potential of participating in a shared global community and gaining more cultural capital and authority about other people and places. Increased engagement with those outside of one's own community is easier, which in turn makes distinctions in status all the more important: as more people become cosmopolitans, everyone must continue establishing even more requirements for becoming a true "global citizen" so one may maintain one's cultural authority. An endless cycle thus ensues.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 309.

transnational and transcultural environment. As their culinary products create a specific idea about Chinese food and identity, their actual videos become commodities for digital consumption.

As discussed earlier, Li and Dianxi's videos ostensibly show all of the steps of growing, harvesting, and cooking various Chinese dishes. A veil is lifted from the mystery of certain kinds of Chinese culinary preparation, as one viewer remarks: "I love to watch her, her. [*sic*] Videos are so relaxing and I have learned things that I do [*sic*] not know before."¹⁷⁵ Yet, the actual medium through which they are able to see, that is, the video, remains masked as a product that requires labor in the same way that preparing these foods does. The culinary labor is visible, while the media labor is still invisible, which transforms these videos as digital products into commodities ripe for consumption precisely because the videos are "separated from [their] production process, [and become] reified, appearing as a natural, autonomous object, created as if by magic, and not by a very particularized...means of production."¹⁷⁶ These videos become commodities in two ways: first, as a Chinese cultural identity that one consumes as and through food; second, as a media object that Li and Dianxi upload to YouTube out of the blue that one consumes by watching culinary processes without thinking about the logistics of the media production; viewers become two-fold consumers.

Viewer comments demonstrate the affective reactions they have towards Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos as well as reveal the various ways that they are interpreting them as some kind of Other object to be admired or aspired towards. For the purposes of this project, I am focusing primarily on Li and Dianxi's YouTube and Weibo uploads and the comments posted

¹⁷⁵ Taler Naser. Comment on "The life of rapeseed oil《菜籽油的一生》之*钵钵鸡, 蛋黄酥, 油焖笋, 咸蛋黄小龙虾) 哈! 哈!" *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyoWTJtp4a4&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

¹⁷⁶ Matthew P. McAllister, "Consumer culture and new media: commodity fetishism in the digital era," *Media Perspectives for the 21st Century*, ed. Stylianos Papathanassopoulos (New York: Routledge, 2011) 150.

under specific videos, and within this subset of videos, there are particular key words that indicate how different audiences are responding to these images and ideas.¹⁷⁷ YouTube and Weibo are the main platforms that Li and Dianxi use and receive the most engagement from; they also represent two broad sub-categories within the women's international audiences: YouTube encompasses international, non-PRC viewers and skews toward English-language comments; Weibo encompasses PRC-viewers in Mandarin-language or 普通話 [common language] comments. Of course, this is not to say that there is no crossover between these very generalized groups of viewers, but it is quite difficult to ascertain any kind of overlap, and thus will not come into this analysis. These two groups are representative of Li and Dianxi's aggregate viewers, but also importantly demonstrate misalignments between these two different audiences' reception and consumption of these videos, as well the way the two women themselves may be shaping those things.

The YouTube comments (largely English-language) on both Li and Dianxi's videos are more categorically similar to each other and they more clearly express a romanticized awe and desire for the fantastical locality expressed in the videos. They are also perhaps more evident of viewers seeking cultural and culinary distinction via an awareness of supposedly more authentic fare. These attitudes may be seen in the terms that continually appeared across different comments and different videos: life and living; heaven, peaceful, relaxing; nature, earth, beautiful, and beauty; country(side), simple, village, natural, environment; grandma/mother, family, grandparents, sharing, sweet, love and loving, thank, gratitude, happy, respect; months, years, weeks, time; hardworking, inspiring, amazing, learn, knowledge; food, cook, eat, woman,

¹⁷⁷ Due to my own personal technological limitations (I couldn't make a Weibo account), I was unable to view Li and Dianxi's older Weibo posts from before 2019. Whatever posts that I could see on the first page of their Weibo profiles are the ones that I focus on. This then dictated which videos and comments I analyzed for comparison from their YouTube channels.

Chinese; good, hard, bless, make; life, living, and well-lived. These words along with variations and synonyms of them appear consistently for ostensibly non-PRC viewers of Li and Dianxi. Viewers' recognition of the locality that Li and Dianxi establish appears in the harking about the beauty of their natural environments; the admiration for the value the women place on their families; as well as the linking of these phenomena with emotions of happiness, bliss, and relaxation. There is also an identification of the role that time plays in the making of these videos, but also the oblique assertion that they belong to an Other time and place: "I watch these videos because somehow it reminds me that in some part of the world, the earth is still beautiful, is [*sic*] as pristine and raw as it should be. It's [*sic*] resources are properly utilized and least [*sic*] of waste is being produced. It just makes me genuinely happy!"¹⁷⁸

This Othering is apparent particularly in the way that many viewers romanticize the space in the women's videos as Edenic; as heaven or heaven on earth; and as paradise. These terms suggest that the women belong to a time outside of time as it were; as physically and temporally removed from any engagement with history, technology, modernity and displaced from a contemporaneous present. While viewers praise these women for the way that they "take care of [their] family and friends" and how they value simple living with "all fresh food from nature," there is also a distance between the women, who are framed as unattainable, flawless paragons of virtue or characters from a fairytale, and reality.¹⁷⁹ In this framework, Li and Dianxi do not have the luxury or privilege of being real people; while they might live a purer, more authentic life

¹⁷⁸ Asmita Das, comment on "It's again that season when the fruit and vegetables are too many to eat, such a headache~," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IClxvZAc-tE&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

¹⁷⁹ Sambo Gaddis, comment on "Must-Have Winter Snack by the Fireside - Rice Ball with Dried Beef," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaBF1kOUaw4&t=1s&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge; ria criz, comment on "A pot of wine among watermelon fields. So... The life of watermelons and grapes? 瓜间一壶酒, 西瓜和葡萄的一生?" *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kgEgOi32CE0&t=1s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

imbued with “respect and gratitude,” they themselves are not allowed agency to live an actual life.¹⁸⁰ There is also amazement expressed at the resourcefulness of these women that recalls the idea of native or local ingenuity: “It’s really amazing to see how crafty they are with their tools for the kitchen and also outside. Their baskets, pickling/cooking pots, fruit stick, etc [*sic*] Very practical living.”¹⁸¹ Occasionally, someone does identify their food as Chinese and as belonging to a larger cultural context, but while many commenters use Li and Dianxi as examples of moral and unadulterated living, they mainly think about these women as sources of inspiration or relaxation for themselves.¹⁸²

These attitudes also arise out of the inherent juxtaposition between the viewers and Li and Dianxi. This again recalls the way that Li and Dianxi’s construct of locality functions, which is to provide a stark contrast between the muddled, complex, and rather uncharacterizable present moment. Amidst the anxieties of the various isms—globalism, capitalism, postindustrialism, populism—and other immediate social, political, and economic crises, one need only to know that Li and Dianxi’s worlds are not this one, nor is the time they live in the present one.¹⁸³ Nothing is certain except for the knowledge that Li and Dianxi’s videos are predictable, soothing, and separate from us. Their situation is stable; ours is not.

¹⁸⁰ Âm Thực Mẹ Làm, comment on “蒜的一生, 实在想不出有创意的名字了! 下次你们帮我想! The life of garlic~,” *YouTube*,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gcShBujgsIQ&t=1s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

¹⁸¹ Krim Kirenke, comment on “Pomegranate Wine - The Fine Taste Endowed by Summer,” *YouTube*,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5q3UfnireHo&t=56s&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge.

¹⁸² “The Chinese past knowledge being documented beautifully and preserved for the future generations”; “The most impressed [*sic*] is her knife. It appears in every video. It looks like [*sic*] made in Qin density [dynasty] (2000 years ago)”; “That’s the way Chinese cook their meal thousand [*sic*] years ago!” irwan adnan; Ruye Xing; R.K C, comments on “Liuzhou ‘Luosifen’: Slurpy, Spicy, and Absolutely Satisfying,” *YouTube*,

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_jUJrIWp2I4&t=2s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi.

¹⁸³ Perhaps most notably at this moment, the COVID-19 pandemic; See also Tejal Rao, “The Reclusive Food Celebrity Li Ziqi is My Quarantine Queen,” *The New York Times*, 22 April 2020,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/dining/li-ziqi-chinese-food.html>.

Viewers also consistently comment on how relaxing and soothing Li and Dianxi's videos are. This in part contributes to this prehistoric paradise as an object of desire, but it also speaks to the ways that viewers use the women's content as aids in sleeping and stress relief: "when i [*sic*] get stressed i watch your videos...its [*sic*] calm and peaceful"; "It's always soothing to ears listening while watching your videos [*sic*] I feel relaxed before retiring to bed."¹⁸⁴ Even if there is no clear or overt attempt to use Li and Dianxi to bolster one's cultural capital, these initially banal comments about the tranquility of these videos actually explicitly reveal how people still treat them as objects and means to be used, even if it is for something as mundane as sleeping.¹⁸⁵ They are idealized women who are showing their viewers about food sourcing, agriculture, and Chinese food—which aligns with Li and Dianxi's self-proclaimed aims—but they are also becoming something else: food porn; an object of the nostalgic and longing gaze; a relaxation and stress-relieving therapy. In any case, the host-tourist relationship that Li and Dianxi establish on their production end transforms into a consumer-commodity from the point of these viewers and commenters. The viewers are now those with primary agency as consumers, while the former hosts become object commodities when subjected to this consumer gaze.

¹⁸⁴ anu rp, comment on "The life of tomato~番茄... ...的一生?" *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_Jx2pB7OZg&t=19s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi; Maria Costales, comment on "Fungus - Favorite Ingredient of Yunnan People," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73RgK2bWCqA&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge.

¹⁸⁵ "Thank you Ziqi for your videos. I was experiencing [*sic*] mental breakdown months ago, your videos are so healing and you totally sooth[e] me!"; "when things feels [*sic*] sad and it feels like the world is weighing me down, i [*sic*] go to watch liziqi jiejie's videos"; "I always feel so relaxing [*sic*] after watching her nature videos." Elise L; 일라이; and TFF Girl Aisha, comments on "'The life of rapeseed oil'《菜籽油的一生》之*钵钵鸡,蛋黄酥,油焖笋,咸蛋黄小龙虾!哈哈!》," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyoWTJtp4a4&t=1s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi; "The life of purple rice, pumpkins, and ... peanuts紫米南瓜的一生..., 还有花生," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rJSZfrJFluw&t=2s&ab_channel=%E6%9D%8E%E5%AD%90%E6%9F%92Liziqi; and "Sweet Present from Nature - Yunnan Honey of Various Flowers," *YouTube*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OyVTG3hp4D4&t=1s&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge.

Comparing these English-language, non-PRC comments to the Mandarin-language comments of Weibo users in the PRC suggests a slightly different manifestation of this consumer-commodity relationship. First, this audience is distinct from the YouTube audience, and the women actually engage slightly differently with them. Whereas on YouTube, Li and Dianxi post a video with little fanfare or subsequent interactions with their viewers, they are more involved on Weibo.¹⁸⁶ The inter-platform differences manifest in the women's video titles, online presences, and perceived personas. Both Li and Dianxi post the same exact videos to Weibo that they do to YouTube, though the Weibo versions are accompanied by a short paragraph that either tell of some childhood memory or have the vague poetic tone. For example, the Weibo version of “Finally, a different title! ‘The life of okra and bamboo fence, LOL这次可算有点不一样的标题了! 秋葵, 和竹筒路的一生嘻嘻” instead has a long paragraph written in Mandarin which translates in English as “‘A flower vine spreads and grows on a high and low wooden fence, toward the light.’ This is a picture I remembered in a cartoon a few years ago... This spring, I also planted a bamboo tube like this one next to the flower road. Then I planted a piece of okra! From spring to autumn, countless vines and fruits are growing towards the sun. It is always hopeful!”¹⁸⁷ This paragraph is not entirely absent from the YouTube video, however; there, it is included in the description box feature of the video. This is consistent for all of Li's videos: she uses the Weibo title as the description for the YouTube video, posted in English (sometimes with parallel Mandarin) and retitles the YouTube version entirely.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁶ This is not entirely the case for Dianxi, who does interact with commenters by liking them or even briefly posting a reply. She does this for both her YouTube and Weibo viewers, but not in any kind of way that greatly alter the framework of this analysis.

¹⁸⁷ “Finally, a different title,” the Weibo version is thus, “一棵花藤攀着高低木栅栏蔓延生长, 朝着光”这是几年前在一部动画片里所记住的画面...今年春天, 我也种下类似这样一条竹筒花路旁边还跟着种了一片秋葵! 春去秋来, 无数藤蔓和果实都在向阳而生, 总归是充满希望的吧!”*Weibo*, uploaded by 李子柒, 20 July 2020, https://weibo.com/2970452952/Jc6R4fotK?from=page_1005052970452952_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rd=1615262277.5884&type=comment.

¹⁸⁸ The same can be seen in “Walnuts from Old Trees - Nut Fragrance From 200-Year-Old Tree,” *YouTube*, uploaded by Dianxi Xiaoge,

Aside from these variances in titling, Li and Dianxi are also much more active on their Weibo profiles. Li in particular is much more engaged with her Weibo followers, posting a screenshot of a long list of instructions for preparing the dishes that she does in the video. Such information completely changes the intent of the videos as more overtly geared towards practical culinary instruction like more conventional culinary media programming rather than the gastro-diplomatic, cultural nature of her isolated videos on YouTube. Furthermore, her engagement on Weibo is also influenced by her highly successful and quite well-known online Taobao shop in China, where she sells various food products, such as 螺蛳粉 (*luosifen* or snail rice noodles) that people can cook at home.

These products tend to be faster versions of the foods she makes in each video, so she often posts promotions for her shop on each video, along with any coupons, sales, or upcoming product launches. This of course firmly and visibly situates her videos within an economic context of e-commerce, product marketing, and the monetization of her distinctive DIY style-turned-brand.¹⁸⁹ This cultivation of a brand of homemade, beautiful, traditional products that is marketed and distributed on a national and even international scale completely upends YouTube viewers' perceptions of Li as being distant from the contemporary forces of global

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DNDvvEq8rtg&t=136s&ab_channel=%E6%BB%87%E8%A5%BF%E5%B0%8F%E5%93%A5DianxiXiaoge. On Weibo, this manifests as “老树核桃——沉淀百年的果仁香气你们知道200年老树结的核桃有多香吗？9月打回来的老树核桃，剥了4个多小时的壳，烤一盘蜂蜜核桃仁，再熬一锅纯正核桃油~油香四溢，这就是核桃树沉淀百年的味道~踩着秋天的尾巴，用核桃油煎一份仪式感满满的牛排，做一锅铁板烧，既温暖又美味！[Old walnut tree—a century-old nut aroma. Do you know how fragrant the walnuts of 200-year-old trees are? I gathered some of the old tree walnuts in September and peeled them more than four hours. Then I roasted the walnut kernels honey and pure walnut oil~The aroma is overflowing, this is the taste of walnut trees that have been there for a hundred years~Stepping into the end of autumn, using a fried steak with walnuts full of ritual meaning makes a pot of teppanyaki, both warm and delicious!].” *Weibo*, uploaded by 滇西小哥, 10 November 2020,

https://weibo.com/6061180654/JthXh13rb?from=page_1005056061180654_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615263075_7354&type=comment. This appears in the description box of the YouTube video. Sometimes, the description box will have a derivative form of the Weibo title, but it is still similar.

¹⁸⁹ 成展鹏, “李子柒品牌携手天猫美食大牌日, 传承了不起的东方味道, [The Li Ziqi Brandjoins hands with Tmall Gourmet Day to Pass On Oriental Flavors]” 中国新闻网安徽, <http://www.ah.chinanews.com/news/2020/0911/261116.shtml>, accessed 15 November 2020.

markets, cultural capital, and monetary profit. Her Chinese viewers know about her brand and her products, which complicates her image of living off the land, self-reliance, and pre-contemporary locality. This makes it all the more fascinating when terms similar to those of her YouTube comments also consistently appear on her Weibo.

When examining comments on the Weibo posts with the same videos, the words and phrases that continuously appeared were consistent with what YouTube commenters also posted, showing that these kinds of responses are representative of Li and Dianxi's audiences more broadly: beautiful and special; sweet, happy, feel, love; brother, sister, grandfather, cousin, grandma/mother, family, friends; time, year, and life; taste, delicious, want, snacks, chopsticks; as well as several that were particular to Weibo users: Yunnan, festival, products, and harvest.¹⁹⁰ The last few refer to Dianxi's native province and the character of much of her food, while the others refer to Li's Taobao shop and certain specialty holiday products. Except for these, the rest also remark on the aesthetics and beauty of the women's videos, along with the prominence of their families and their devotion to taking care of them, and the awareness of the time spent producing these videos.

People also write about how seeing the women prepare certain dishes remind them of childhood, which frames the videos as a source of nostalgia for viewer-consumers: 小时候家门口也有一颗酸石榴，树下有很多蚂蚁窝，石榴树根的位置被好奇的我掏的大洞小洞的，现在家门口全部打起水泥地，树没了，蚂蚁窝也没了，我也长大了，[When I was little, there was a sour pomegranate at the door of my house, and there were also many ant nests under the tree. The tree roots had been dug up because of my curiosity, but now there is a cement floor at the door of the house, the tree is gone, the ant nests are gone, and I have also grown up].¹⁹¹ There

¹⁹⁰ These are English translations of Mandarin comments.

¹⁹¹ 菜包老包子 [Cai Bao Lao Baozi], comment on “石榴酒——夏天留下的甘醇味道7月的酸石榴酿到1月才成酒，配上一锅热腾腾的猪肚鸡汤，再烧一盆火，边喝酒边吃肉再烤着火，冬天应该没有什么比这个更惬意舒服的事

are also many comments about “这一幕特别温婉贤淑，微风轻拂也来凑热闹 [this scene is very gentle and virtuous, and the breeze also comes to join in the fun]” and “哇，这一面真的好美啊，远处是山，近处是雾，山雾相遮 [Wow, this picture is really beautiful with mountains in the distance and fog close-up. The mountains are covered in mist].”¹⁹² These comments illustrate the ways that Chinese viewers also focus on the sensory aesthetics of these videos, which are heightened, and also admire them as pieces or objects of their own senses. There are also plenty of comments about the women’s families, recalling the oblique (or not so oblique) allusions to filiality and family values.

This parallel consumer-commodity relationship begins to diverge when examining the level of Li and Dianxi’s engagement with Weibo viewers. As mentioned previously, there is a noticeable difference, for both Li and Dianxi both post comments in addition to the main video posts. Li does so to promote her products and to give viewers a step-by-step instruction list of her dishes (whether people actually recreate them at home is unclear, but they certainly do not exactly recreate her methods). Dianxi tends to reply to comment on her Weibo videos, whereas

了吧 [Pomegranate wine—the sweet taste of summer. The sour July pomegranate doesn’t become wine until January. It is then served with a pot of hot pork belly and chicken soup, then burns a pot of fire. Drinking while eating meat and roasting it on the fire, there is nothing more pleasant and comfortable in winter, right?],”

https://weibo.com/6061180654/JE48xfay?from=page_1005056061180654_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615303355.7427.

¹⁹² 天雅觅芝音 [Tianya Mi Zhiyin], comment on “去年霜降之后整了一缸柿子醋，直到今年初雪才吃得。大冷天的围着火炉子吃着新悟的柿饼、烤点小肠蘸点醋就着热腾腾的鱼汤这才是属于冬天的幸福啊...愿这一串串的红柿子送走即将过去的2020年，带来新一年所有的你们万柿如意，好柿连连 [After the frost came last year, I made a full jar of persimmon vinegar. It wasn’t eaten until this year’s first snow. In the cold weather, eat fresh persimmons and roast small intestines dipped in hot vinegar around the stove. This is our winter happiness...may this bunch of red persimmons send off 2020 and bring all of you into the new year, full of wishful and yummy persimmons],”

https://weibo.com/2970452952/JxGKggbaL?from=page_1005052970452952_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615304601.5275&type=comment; Sixty-four, comment on “今年春节疫情期间在家呆着无聊，给荒废的池塘修了护栏、填了泥土种了花和菜从了勿生机到一池繁花、也不过半年光景自然和生命总在不断的给我们惊喜

花开好了，果子熟了，蕃茄红了，番茄火锅起来！ [I was bored during this year’s Spring Festival epidemic, so we repaired fences in some abandoned ponds, filled in the soil, and planted flowers and vegetables. What started as an unlivable pond became a pond of blooming flowers; not even six months have passed and nature and life still constantly surprise us],”

https://weibo.com/2970452952/Jc6R4fotK?from=page_1005052970452952_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615305040.0162&type=comment.

she limits this kind of interaction on YouTube. Both women also occasionally post photo collages of behind-the-scenes or extra images from the videos.¹⁹³

The contents of these comments and photos matters less than the actual fact of their engagement with viewers, which makes the relationship between them less of a subject-object one and more of an interactive and reciprocal relationship that characterizes many social media influencers on YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, V Live, Weibo, etc. They conform more to typical social media stars on Weibo than they do on YouTube, removing the perceived distance between their audiences and themselves and the mystique that lends their videos to fetishization and commodity consumption. Of course, this is immediately undermined by the fact that primarily Li has a lucrative and well-known online retail business on TaoBao. Since her shop's 2012 inception, every video may be viewed through a marketing lens as an advertisement for her products.¹⁹⁴ This of course is the most concrete and reification of the consumer-commodity relationship: the women selling commodities and capitalizing on their personas as monetizable. This also holds for their YouTube channels because YouTube videos are monetized by ads that run during their videos, and because creators are paid based on their number of views (Li and Dianxi have many hundreds of millions of views combined). This reveals that Li and Dianxi—who has her own albeit much smaller e-commerce platform—are intimately engaged in

¹⁹³ @ 滇西小哥, “突然觉得‘腿粗得像猪’是一句赞美的话, 你看哈, 我的腿不仅比猪的粗, 还没有猪的白…… [Suddenly I feel like saying that one's 'legs that are as thick as pigs' is a compliment. Look, my legs are not only thicker than pigs, but not as white as they are],” *Weibo*, 17 Dec 2020, 3:22 p.m., https://weibo.com/6061180654/JySUx6nWy?from=page_1005056061180654_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615312847.4868&type=comment#_rnd1615312853536; @李子柒, “刚吃过年夜饭, 所有的菜名都是新年对你们的祝福。大家照顾好自己和家人, 注意安全。我在远方为你祈祷新的一年健康平安 [I just ate New Year's Eve Dinner, and all the dishes' names are new various year blessings. Take care of yourself and your family, and stay safe. I'm praying for your health and safety in the new year from afar],” *Weibo*, 24 Jan 2020, 9:31 p.m., https://weibo.com/2970452952/Tr0BZqP0V?from=page_1005052970452952_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615312884.1776&type=comment#_rnd1615312886367.

¹⁹⁴ It must also be noted that she also has an English-language retail section on her English-language blog, but her primary business comes from Taobao; also please see chapter one for more discussion of Li and Dianxi's personal blogs.

global capitalism and economic-cultural exchange in ways that the YouTube commenters would deny them.

Denouement: Time is *Ming*

Looking at Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos from the perspective of viewers changes the nature of the relationship between these two sides. From the affective and sensory reactions to the actual aesthetics of each video, to the potential of these videos increasing one's culinary and cultural capital, and to the kinds of ideas audiences take away and identify in the comments—all of these aspects reflect different facets of what is ultimately a consumer-commodity relationship. Viewers are consumers of Li and Dianxi's videos as commodities that have some kind of use-value for them, whether it is a vicarious consumption of food, social distinction, stress relief, or the purchase of various products.

Though this relationship is different from the host-tourist one that Li and Dianxi seek to establish from their perspective of production, it is still related. Though the agency and subject may be reversed in these two relationships, there remains the need for an invitation to consume via advertising, discounts, and the like, as well as actual desirability. The invitation Li and Dianxi extend to viewers and the kind of guest experience viewers have while watching is made possible by the allure of their lives, the deliberate lack of direct speech, and the temporal transportation that occurs in their videos. These same duties they perform as hosts also are what make them desirable commodities; the perspective only shifts. Similarly, tourists travel in order to consume something new, culturally or gastronomically or experientially. Initially, they may be neophytes at the mercy of the Native Informant, but once they have arrived, they have full agency to consume what is there by virtue of their privilege as mobile, well-off subjects. These two relationships are mutually reinforcing.

Both relationships depend largely on time, for the temporal juxtaposition that Li and Dianxi establish in their videos and as part of their locality ensnares the viewer from the beginning. The culinary travel and tourism that happens is temporal rather than physical by way of a tour guide. The transportation, as well as the location of authentic and traditional in these videos is incumbent on the constructed and perceived developmental and temporal difference between contemporary viewers and the women's supposed ahistoric lifestyle. However, the fact of their contemporaneity with the viewer allows for their online and culinary existences in the first place: they film themselves, edit the footage, then upload it onto all these different social media platforms. They profit through the time people spend watching them, and from the ability to time-lapse plant growth and seasonal cycles so that people will remain interested and continue watching.

In this contemporary global landscape, time is valuable; the ability to have the leisure to not be productive is a privilege, but Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge have instrumentalized time in a new way that plays on the imperial, developmentalist gaze that benefits them economically. Time is money and 命 (*ming*), or life, for them; it characterizes their brands and personas and allows them to literally sustain themselves on the food that they grow and sell.

Conclusion

Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge Are Fake

Throughout the course of this project, I had many conversations with many different people about Li Ziqi, Dianxi Xiaoge, their videos, and Chinese food in general. Their responses and ideas were always thoughtful, creative, and often more complex than I initially wanted from them or gave them credit for. However, regardless of who I spoke with, a common thread brought their ideas together: there was a collective awe at the beauty, simplicity, naturalness, and dreaminess of Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos followed by some sense of disbelief and skepticism of the truth of these women's lives. More than one person remarked that Li and Dianxi seemed like actresses performing on a set while also acknowledging that they seemed to be performing ancient, traditional, or time-honored culinary techniques. The first and third set of ideas recall the ideas I examined in chapters one and three, and which I will discuss more later.

The second set of ideas suggests something else and brings to mind the famous couplet from the opening chapter of the Chinese novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* or 《紅樓夢》: “假作真時真亦假, / 無為有處有還無 [Truth becomes fiction when the fiction is true, / real becomes not-real when the unreal's real].”¹⁹⁵ Without belaboring the symbolic and thematic resonances this couplet has in the novel, it bears significance here for the unstable and fluid nature of truth. The doubt that others expressed in the veracity of Li and Dianxi's videos lay in the qualities that make their videos so alluring and captivating: the sumptuous images of nature, the abundance of homegrown foodstuffs, and the ease with which the women accomplish everything. For the people that I spoke with, the locality they establish in their videos was not simply an escape—though they acknowledged that there was a rose-tinted romance to them—it was a veneer that

¹⁹⁵ Cao Xueqin, *The Story of the Stone: Volume I*, trans. David Hawkes (London: Penguin Books, 1973) 55.

disguised the realities of rural farming. While this may be true, there would be much less appeal if Li and Dianxi focused on the sweat, dirt, resources, and time that goes into agriculture.

Indeed, the fact that these women do *not* show the gritty or boring aspects of a farm-to-table, agricultural lifestyle speaks to the amount of effort they go to maintain this illusion, not only of the ease of their lives, but also the amount of labor that goes into their video production and their deep engagement with current technology like the Internet and social media. There must be some level of truth to what they show audiences in their videos, for they are actually doing all the sowing, planting, harvesting, and cooking that appears in each video, but we are reminded, however subtly, that this is all mediated through the choices the women make in what the film and what they edit out; so there is also some untruth to this as well. That neither woman discusses or addresses this kind of work shows that any mention of their filming, editing, and uploading processes would undermine and deny the naturalism they sell, literally and figuratively, and would shatter the illusion.¹⁹⁶ Yet at the same time, the women's viewers are watching them on some kind of social media platform, that is, YouTube or Weibo, so there is an immediate if unconscious assumption that all these women are not living wholly off the land, cut off from present time.

Then we, as viewers, must examine our own biases and preconceived notions that inform our reactions to Li Ziqi, Dianxi Xiaoge, and Chinese food, as well as the what these women would have us think about them. Why do we understand these women's culinary processes as ancient and/or time-honored? What about their Chinese food is more authentic than Peking duck in a Beijing restaurant or Panda Express? How do we even know that what they are producing is

¹⁹⁶ There is less of a curtain drawn over the eyes of ostensibly PRC Weibo users-viewers, who are occasionally given glimpses of the women's behind-the-scenes. There are a couple of interviews in which Li and Dianxi discuss the way they film, but they are short and non-specific. Finally, the literal selling that happens is through their online retailers. I discuss all of this in greater detail in chapter three.

Chinese food? If we are skeptical of the veracity of their videos, then how can we also say they are authentic, real, or traditional? Are we making some kind of prescriptive judgment about food, eating, and living?

The answers to these questions are worth exploring further, but in the course of my research, I have found that Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge create these kinds of reactions through their construction of a universal locality that exists in a mystical before-time that they then invite viewers to see. Like Eric Hobsbawm's concept of invented tradition, Li and Dianxi's universal locality is more aesthetic than anything else: any attempts to historicize their techniques, technology, dress, dishes, and so on would reveal that this so-called tradition is actually very specific to and dependent on time and place.¹⁹⁷ The nonspecific but past-time *aesthetic* enables Li and Dianxi to be traditional because tradition is an imagination of a temporal existence, that is, the past, that is supposed to be more authentic. Significantly, Li and Dianxi's nonspecific aesthetic of tradition is not Chinese despite audience's immediate identification of their food as such. The only Chineseness that appears in their videos arises by virtue of their ethnic bodies and the language they speak; they themselves are Chinese women, thus, the cuisine they show must therefore also really be Chinese.¹⁹⁸ These women's cultural, political, social, linguistic, and culinary identities as Chinese allow them to articulate a sense of national identity and Chineseness by way of a universal locality. Rather than contrast the national, the local actually enhances a cultural and culinary Chineseness that transcends the geopolitical nation, and that people easily recognize from anywhere.

Thus, regardless of the truth or fiction of these women's lives as-seen in their videos, the viewer identification of Li and Dianxi's authority over and purveyance of a authentic Chinese

¹⁹⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions."

¹⁹⁸ Their clothes and tools also have some vaguely Asian characteristics like mandarin collars, semi-*hanfu* tops, and bamboo objects, but nothing is coded as particularly Chinese. See chapter one for more.

cuisine feeds into the characterization of their locality as Chinese. Furthermore, this identification allows viewers to accumulate cultural and culinary capital because they are viewing ostensibly more traditional Chinese food; access to kung pao chicken and fried rice is easy, but the ability to refer to the kind of food that Li and Dianxi make requires deeper investigation, greater familiarization with Chinese ingredients, and the privilege of knowing where to look for sources of capital accumulation. Everything the women sell becomes real when viewers consume these videos as a way to accrue their knowledge and strengthen their social position. The ability to differentiate between Li and Dianxi's Chinese food versus the Chinese food in red takeout containers is the prize. In another more literal sense, viewers also consume Li and Dianxi's authentic Chinese food by buying the products they sell online, revealing the ways that these women are deeply involved in contemporary economic and social structures. They profit off everything viewers believe is natural, raw, and decommodified.

Finally, the ideas that we see or map onto Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos about Chinese food are possible because of the way that the user-orientation of social media shapes and is shaped by viewers and producers. The immense popularity of these women's videos comes in part from the individualistic structure of social media spaces: one person may film, edit, and post a video all by oneself and gain views and likes from many other individuals. Unlike conventional television programming or cinematic film, everything is entirely self-produced with no director or company influencing the final product. Moreover, the sheer inundation of social media exerts a much greater influence on people's ideas and habitus now than ever before, and as we see with Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge, these user-centered medias have much more power than more conventional cookbook or television program mediums. Certainly within the genre of culinary

media, there is a shift occurring as more individuals post popular and viral videos, recipes, pictures, etc on platforms like YouTube, Weibo, and other spaces.

Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge's videos illustrate how Chineseness and ideas about Chinese food can be mapped onto nonspecific ideas about time, technology, and visual aesthetics that, upon closer examination, are actually intimately related to discourses about modernity and identity. Yet, amidst the narratives that Li and Dianxi present about Chinese food in their videos, they are only two media producers amidst an ocean of social media users, and they are only a small slice in the large pie of Chinese food representations. While they would have us, and we would have ourselves, believe that real Chinese food is self-sufficient and beautiful, serves and nourishes the family, and lives off the land, this is far from a definitive or representative version of Chinese food. In this sense, Li Ziqi and Dianxi Xiaoge *are* fake and fictional as they make claims about Chinese cuisine as two Chinese women in Sichuan and Yunnan right now, while the rest of Chinese food remains to be seen.

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今年春天，我也种下类似这样一条竹筒花路旁边还跟着种了一片秋葵！春去秋

，无数藤蔓和果实都在向阳而生，总归是充满希望的吧 [‘A flower vine spreads and

grows on a high and low wooden fence, toward the light.’ This is a picture I remembered

in a cartoon from a few years ago... This spring, I also planted a bamboo tube like this

one next to the flower road. Then I planted a piece of okra! From spring to autumn,

countless vines and fruits are growing towards the sun. It is always hopeful!]” *Weibo*,

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https://weibo.com/2970452952/Jc6R4fotK?from=page_1005052970452952_profile&wvr6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615262277.5884&type=comment.

“老树核桃——沉淀百年的果仁香气你们知道200年老树结的核桃有多香吗？9月打回来

老树核桃，剥了4个多小时的壳，烤一盘蜂蜜核桃仁，再熬一锅纯正核桃油~油

四溢，这就是核桃树沉淀百年的味道~踩着秋天的尾巴，用核桃油煎一份仪式

满满的牛排，做一锅铁板烧，既温暖又美味！ [Old walnut tree—a century-old

aroma. Do you know how fragrant the walnuts of 200-year-old trees are? I gathered some

of the old tree walnuts in September and peeled them more than four hours. Then I roasted the walnut kernels honey and pure walnut oil~The aroma is overflowing, this is the taste of walnut trees that have been there for a hundred years~Stepping into the end of autumn, using a fried steak with walnuts full of ritual meaning makes a pot of teppanyaki, both warm and delicious!].” *Weibo*, uploaded by 滇西小哥, 10 November 2020, https://weibo.com/6061180654/JthXh13rb?from=page_1005056061180654_profile&wvr6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615263075.7354&type=comment.

“石榴酒——夏天留下的甘醇味道7月的酸石榴酿到1月才成酒，配上一锅热腾腾的猪肚汤，再烧一盆火，边喝酒边吃肉再烤着火，冬天应该没有什么比这个更惬意舒的事了吧 [Pomegranate wine—the sweet taste of summer. The sour July pomegranate doesn’t become wine until January. It is then served with a pot of hot pork belly and Chicken soup, then burns a pot of fire. Drinking while eating meat and roasting it on the fire, there is nothing more pleasant and comfortable in winter, right?].” *Weibo*, uploaded by 滇西小哥, 20 January 2021, https://weibo.com/6061180654/JE48xfay?from=page_1005056061180654_profile&wvr6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615303355.7427.

“去年霜降之后整了一缸柿子醋，直到今年初雪才吃得。大冷天的围着火炉子吃着新捂柿饼、烤点小肠蘸点醋就着热腾腾的鱼汤这才是属于冬天的幸福啊...愿这一串的红柿子送走即将过去的2020年，带来新一年所有的你们万柿如意，好柿连连 [After the frost came last year, I made a full jar of persimmon vinegar. It wasn’t eaten until this year’s first snow. In the cold weather, eat fresh persimmons and roast small intestines dipped in hot vinegar around the stove. This is our winter happiness...may this

bunch of red persimmons send off 2020 and bring all of you into the new year, full of wishful and yummy persimmons].” *Weibo*, uploaded by 李子柒, 9 December 2020, https://weibo.com/2970452952/JxGKggbaL?from=page_1005052970452952_profile&v=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615304601.5275&type=comment.

“今年春节疫情期间在家呆着无聊，给荒废的池塘修了护栏、填了泥土种了花和菜从了生机到一池繁花、也不过半年光景自然和生命总在不断的给我们惊喜花开好了果子熟了，蕃茄红了，番茄火锅起来！ [I was bored during this year’s SpringFestival epidemic, so we repaired fences in some abandoned ponds, filled in the soil, and planted flowers and vegetables. What started as an unlivable pond became a pond of blooming flowers; not even six months have passed and nature and life still constantly surprise us].” *Weibo*, uploaded by 李子柒, 20 July 2020, https://weibo.com/2970452952/Jc6R4fotK?from=page_1005052970452952_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615305040.0162&type=comment.

@滇西小哥 [Dianxi Xiaoge], “突然觉得‘腿粗得像猪’是一句赞美的话，你看哈,我的腿仅比猪的粗，还没有猪的白…… [Suddenly I feel like saying that one’s‘legs that are as thick as pigs’ is a compliment. Look, my legs are not only thicker than pigs, but not as white as they are].” *Weibo*, 17 Dec 2020, 3:22 p.m., https://weibo.com/6061180654/JySUx6nWy?from=page_1005056061180654_profile&v=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615312847.4868&type=comment#_rnd16153128535

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@李子柒 [Li Ziqi], “刚吃过年夜饭，所有的菜名都是新年对你们的祝福。大家照顾好自己和家人，注意安全。我在远方为你祈祷新的一年健康平安 [I just ate New Year’s Eve

Dinner, and all the dishes' names are new various year blessings. Take care of yourself and your family, and stay safe. I'm praying for your health and safety in the new year from afar]." *Weibo*, 24 Jan 2020, 9:31 p.m.,

https://weibo.com/2970452952/Ir0BZqP0V?from=page_1005052970452952_profile&wvr=6&mod=weibotime&ssl_rnd=1615312884.1776&type=comment#_rnd1615312886367