

# Socializing Medicine

Health Humanities and East Asian Media

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# Introduction

Pao-chen Tang, Yuqian Yan, and Ling Zhang

On July 23, 2021, fifteen minutes into the opening ceremony of the Tokyo Olympics, Japanese dancer Moriyama Mirai took the stage alone in a nearly empty stadium. Draped in white and illuminated by a spotlight, Moriyama's body gracefully unfolded from a crouched position, moving with a deliberate and forceful elegance before settling into a posture reminiscent of *Balāsana* (child's pose)—a symbolic stance encapsulating both life and death. Throughout the performance, Moriyama's pale and expressionless face conveyed a palpable sense of unease and even terror, heightened by the eerie and unsettling music that accompanied the dance. Indeed, the performance was followed by a reminder of the social tenebrosity that the venue's strong spotlight could not dispel: a silent tribute to those who perished during the global COVID-19 pandemic. It was therefore fitting that Moriyama performed the *ankoku butō* (often abbreviated to *butō*)—literally the “dance of darkness”—developed by avant-garde choreographer Hijikata Tatsumi (1928–1986) in post-World War II Japan, when the disintegrating empire was reordered and reconstructed under American occupation. Drawing on the raw features, unpolished behaviors, and overtly sexualized expressions of marginalized individuals such as criminals, prostitutes, the ill, and the impoverished, Hijikata endeavored to acknowledge these subaltern subjects, who are often invisible or intentionally excluded from Japan's aesthetic canons.<sup>1</sup> By referencing such postwar extremism, Moriyama's performance channeled the spirits of those whose lives were lost due to the questionable public health policies of many governments during the ongoing pandemic in 2021.

The richness of Moriyama's dance gains additional depth when contextualized within the framework of the pandemic-influenced Olympics. The 2021 event, necessitated by global circumstances, was purposefully crafted for televisual broadcast.

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1. Vicki Sanders, “Dancing and the Dark Soul of Japan: An Aesthetic Analysis of ‘Butō,’” *Asian Theatre Journal* 5, no. 2 (1988): 148–63.

Despite the longstanding global broadcast of the Olympics through communication satellites since the 1964 Tokyo Summer Games, the 2021 edition took on a new dimension as a technologically mediated spectacle, tailored exclusively for television and online streaming. The imposition of an emergency state, leading to the exclusion of live audiences except a few, transformed the Tokyo venues into spaces primarily for virtual engagement by both domestic and international viewers. Moriyama's dance, therefore, was not merely a live performance but was conceived as a media spectacle from the outset, reflecting themes of illness and mortality in a time of pervasive unease, indignation, and collective mourning.

Moriyama's dance and its subsequent media dissemination highlight the intersection of corporeality, well-being, and the regional and national hierarchies embodied in medical and ecological practices at the center of this volume. As of 2022 and 2023, when we worked on this book amid the unremitting surge of COVID-19 and other respiratory infectious diseases, there was a renewed emphasis on the interplay among public health, structural inequity, and mass media. The so-called new normal of the everyday saw continuous media updates on infection statistics, health guidelines, and preventative strategies, which have created or reinforced the boundaries of various imagined communities. Despite proclamations of the pandemic's conclusion by several political leaders, racially motivated violence against (East) Asian communities in Europe and North America remained unabated. Although the pandemic was undeniably a global phenomenon, the complex cultural and geopolitical region of East Asia had been thrust into the limelight of Western media scrutiny. This focus led to the propagation of essentialist cultural perceptions, particularly regarding collectivism and conformity, stereotypes about hygiene practices, racialized discourse about East Asian bodies, and techno-orientalist narratives concerning East Asian approaches to digital surveillance and epidemic disease management.

Individual and public health were thus entangled with the mechanisms of representation and (re)mediation, with the pandemic itself metamorphosing into a media spectacle inseparable from myriad audiovisual forms and platforms. A plethora of cultural and media productions—documentary and fictional films, television programs, photographs, songs, vlogs, and digital diagrams, among others—has since proliferated across platforms in response to the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> They often position the COVID-19 emergency within an extended discourse on medical and public health history. These works of popular science not only convey medical knowledge to the public but also foster a collective awareness regarding how the production of

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2. Some examples from China and the United States include documentaries such as *The Lost Spring* (Fan Jian, 2020), *76 Days* (Wu Hao and Chen Weixi, 2020), and Ryo Takeuchi's *Nanjing Anti-epidemic Scene* (2020), *Long Time No See, Wuhan* (2021), and *China's Post-Pandemic Era: Winning Against All Odds* (2021).

this knowledge and public health protocols can be historicized. Between 2020 and 2022, for instance, a host of Chinese documentaries and videos revisited the 1911 Manchurian pneumonic plague.<sup>3</sup> This media wave offered a multifaceted exploration of the epidemic by exploring the scientific and political dynamics of the era and examining the audiovisual methods employed in recounting this historical event. Central to this media examination is the role of Dr. Wu Lien-teh, a Cambridge-educated physician of Malaysian Chinese descent. Appointed by the Qing court as the director of the anti-plague campaign, Wu implemented crucial quarantine and disinfection measures, including the development of layered surgical masks, framed as the precursor of the current N95 mask in contemporary media. To execute their agenda, Wu's team had to negotiate with various political and military powers in Manchuria, including Russian and Japanese colonial forces. The contemporary portrayal of Wu as a heroic medical figure is thus often imbued with nationalistic overtones, not least because the political backdrop of the 1911 plague invites comparisons with present-day China, facing contention with the West on ideological, political, technological and military fronts.

In addition to repurposing historical materials to comment on present circumstances, this corpus of works self-reflexively engages with the material foundation of media technologies. The abundance of audiovisual media detailing Wu's contribution to public health is made possible due to Wu's own meticulous documentation and orchestration of his team's endeavors through photography and textual narratives, such as a bilingual (English and Chinese) photo album that chronicles the crisis through the lens of Wu's epistemic and epidemiological knowledge.<sup>4</sup> This album, alongside Wu's autobiography that details the anti-plague initiatives, have shaped the commemoration of his legacy. It is upon the foundation of such archival materials that contemporary media productions reinterpret a tumultuous past with the aim of bridging past and present narratives.

Just as Moriyama's dance summoned the ghosts of the subaltern from postwar Japan, and contemporary Chinese media reinterpreted the 1911 Manchurian plague, *Socializing Medicine: Health Humanities and East Asian Media* explores the intersection of public health and popular media within the historical and geopolitical frameworks of East Asia. Organized both chronologically and thematically, the

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3. On March 30, 2020, for instance, China Central Television's primary channel serving Chinese-speaking audiences overseas (CCTV-4) screened a documentary on the Great Manchurian Plague of 1911. On May 28, 2022, another documentary on the historical event was aired on the science and education channel of the CCTV (CCTV-10). Numerous short videos on the event and other relevant topics by individual content creators appeared on video sharing platforms such as Youku and Bilibili.
  4. For an analysis of the photo album, see Christos Lynteris, "Photography, Zoonosis and Epistemic Suspension After the End of Epidemics," in *The Anthropology of Epidemics*, ed. Ann H. Kelly, Frédéric Keck, and Christos Lynteris (London: Routledge, 2019), 84–101.



ten chapters of this volume offer a transregional, multimedia, and interdisciplinary exploration that encompasses a diverse range of locales, including Japan, South Korea, mainland China, and Taiwan. The title *Socializing Medicine* carries a twofold significance. First, it underscores a commitment to social justice in media productions that envision accessible and equitable medical and health care practices. Second, it challenges the reductive view of medicine and health as merely “scientific” and “objective” by accentuating their sociopolitical aspects and institutional infrastructures. In anchoring these emphases in the East Asian context, the volume further challenges the Western-centric tendencies prevalent in the fields of medical and health humanities, as well as their intersection with media.

Incorporating a non-Western perspective is crucial for the diversification and decolonization of knowledge production and intellectual discourse. This approach not only expands the geographical and cultural horizons of existing literature but also reshapes the dominant paradigms through which the intersections among medicine, public welfare, political economy, and audiovisual media have been discussed. By focusing on East Asia, this volume underscores the necessity for the interdisciplinary confluence of these fields to be attuned to cultural and geopolitical specificities. Indeed, some contributors elucidate the complex relations of medicine and media against the backdrop of imperialism and (neo)colonialism, including Japan’s colonization of Korea and the postwar Pax Americana that profoundly shaped the developments of Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. By clarifying the hierarchical social structures within these historical and global-regional frameworks, their shared goal is to locate alternative approaches to health care and media practices that are anti-imperial and anti-colonial in nature. Some other contributors highlight the tension between capitalist and socialist systems during the Cold War. By critically examining the ideologies of medicine and media productions in the “high socialist” period in the People’s Republic of China (spanning the early 1950s to the late 1970s), they complicate the entrenched Cold War narratives that tend to depict socialist medicine and media as mere myths and propagandistic tools. Building on the foundation of these inquiries regarding early to mid-twentieth century history, the volume further addresses pertinent and urgent concerns in the neoliberal capitalist East Asia today, including environmentalism, ableism, and the culture of mental health and healing—not least articulated through digital media.

Facilitating a dialogue among health humanities, media studies, and East Asian studies, the following pages will first define the concepts of medical humanities and health humanities and then delineate how this volume engages with and diversifies these fields by introducing an East Asian, media-sensitive perspective. Subsequently, we will explore the entanglements of medicine, health humanities, and media in modern and contemporary East Asian history and geopolitics before providing an overview of the book’s four sections that host ten chapters.

## Health Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Medicine, People, and Environments

Heeding the recent appeals from scholars in the medical humanities to transcend the conventional “humanistic perspective on medicine” and foster “a cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural space for a bidirectional critical interrogation of both biomedicine (simplistic reductions of life to biology) and the humanities (simplistic reductions of suffering and health injustice to cultural relativism),”<sup>5</sup> *Socializing Medicine* understands medicine as a biocultural paradigm. This perspective acknowledges the integration of scientific inquiry and practice with culturally contingent realms, including aesthetics, ethics, biopolitics, and public policy. Exploring these junctures entails an investigation into the discursive underpinning of medicine as a sociocultural construct. In the context of media analysis, this approach recognizes that discussions of media products about medicine and public health must move beyond the one-dimensional theoretical sphere of representation. Indeed, texts, images, and sounds are intrinsically interwoven with, and reflective of, the tangible physical and institutional realities they engage with and, concurrently, interpret, mediate, and mold.

*Socializing Medicine* aims to engage the academic realms of medical and health humanities by exploring how diverse media forms and curative practices are mutually constitutive and firmly entrenched in sociopolitical contexts and collective human well-being. The conceptual framework of “medical humanities” emerged in the 1970s to investigate the ethical dimensions of medicine by integrating disparate disciplinary fields. It gained prominence in academic and clinical discourse, particularly in the late twentieth century.<sup>6</sup> Medical humanities scholars employ methodologies from various humanities and social sciences disciplines, including history of medicine, anthropology, and sociology.<sup>7</sup> As Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods point out, the field’s foundation rests on three “E”s: ethics (including both medical ethics and bioethics), education, and experience (focusing on the qualitative aspects of illness).<sup>8</sup> Generally speaking, the field seeks to enhance the patient-clinician

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5. Julia Kristeva, Marie Rose Moro, John Ødemark, and Eivind Engebretsen, “Cultural Crossings of Care: An Appeal to the Medical Humanities,” *Medical Humanities* 44, no. 1 (2018): 56, emphasis original.
  6. Sander L. Gilman, *Illness and Image: Case Studies in the Medical Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2015), xi; Lisa M. DeTora, and Stephanie M. Hilger, “Introduction: Bodies and Transitions in the Health Humanities,” in *Bodies in Transition in The Health Humanities: Representation of Corporeality*, ed. Lisa M. DeTora and Stephanie M. Hilger (London: Routledge, 2020), 3; and Cole, Carlin, and Carson, *Medical Humanities*, 7.
  7. Gilman, *Illness and Image*, xi.
  8. Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods, “Introduction,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities*, ed. Anne Whitehead, Angela Woods, Sarah Atkinson, Jane Macnaughton, and Jennifer Richards (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 3.

relationship and foster empathy in medical practitioners by immersing them in diverse cultural perspectives on health and illness.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the field of medical humanities aims to address the increasing imbalance between the technological advancements of health care and the intrinsically human aspects of care provision. This divide has been exacerbated by the commodification of health care systems and the pervasive reliance on costly medical technologies and biomedicine, deepening depersonalization within clinical environments. Such trends are symptomatic of institutional shifts toward profit maximization, often at the detriment of patient welfare and the well-being of physicians and medical trainees. These negative developments highlight the importance of recentering human experience in medical practice and health care systems.

The medical humanities paradigm, while invaluable, has encountered critiques for its limitations, as suggested by scholars such as Lisa M. DeTora and Stephanie M. Hilger. They argue that this approach, without a critique of the larger social forces behind the medicalization of illness and disability, may inadvertently reinforce existing hierarchical structures instead of deconstructing them to establish more equitable power and expertise dynamics.<sup>10</sup> In response, the concept of “health humanities” has gained prominence, either complementing or partially supplanting medical humanities. This approach expands the purview of medical humanities’ inquiry to encompass the broader impacts of medicine beyond the patient-medical professional relationship. In other words, it seeks to transcend the confines of clinical settings as well as the emphasis on empathy and patient narratives by integrating a wider array of critical concerns, such as social justice, systemic inequalities in health care, the sociological aspects of medicine, and the role of various institutions from hospitals to advertising agencies. The primary objective of health humanities is to articulate alternative perspectives to the prevailing norms, thereby fostering a more comprehensive and socially conscious understanding of health and medicine.<sup>11</sup>

The health humanities framework not only expands the field of medicine but also advocates for a more politically engaged interpretation of “humanities.” Sari Alschuler notes a divergence in how the term has been conceptualized within medical contexts versus humanities scholarship. In medical spheres, “humanities” is often perceived as a means to infuse humaneness into the scientific rigidity of

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9. Therese Jones, Delese Wear, and Lester D. Friedman, “Introduction: The Why, the What, and the How of the Medical/Health Humanities” in *Health Humanities Reader*, ed. Therese Jones, Delese Wear, and Lester D. Friedman (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2014), 1–9.
  10. DeTora and Hilger, Foreword to *Bodies in Transition in The Health Humanities: Representation of Corporeality*, xix.
  11. Gilman, *Illness and Image*, xxvi; Rishi Goyal and Arden Hegele, “Introduction,” in *Culture and Medicine: Critical Readings in the Health and Medical Humanities*, ed. Rishi Goyal and Arden Hegele (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), 1–8.

medicine. Conversely, in humanities scholarship, it signifies “the ability to navigate the complexities of interpersonal interaction and their ethical implications, to relate the individual to the structural, to historicize encounters, to communicate accurately and effectively across a variety of media, and to engage in creative analytical thinking about health care.”<sup>12</sup> Health humanities scholars, dedicated to establishing the field’s legitimacy, emphasize the shared core values and a commitment to social justice that unite practitioners from various disciplines.<sup>13</sup>

*Socializing Medicine* aligns with such objectives, stressing the importance of understanding humanity beyond mere notions of humaneness and humanism. As Samuel Dubal argues, liberal humanism frequently overlooks the problematic terms and conditions upon which its fulfillment is built.<sup>14</sup> It is these foundational aspects of humanity, along with their underlying assumptions and implications, that our volume seeks to critically interrogate. Health humanities compel us to acknowledge that medicine is not a purely neutral, objective science as per post-Enlightenment ideologies. Rather, it is deeply influenced and shaped by cultural-economic forces, social privileges, and ingrained biases pertaining to class, gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, age, and disability, among other factors.<sup>15</sup> Health humanities scholars have thus critiqued the evidence-based approach of biomedical sciences and the ideology of scientific objectivity, demonstrating how these concepts have been utilized to justify the marginalization, discrimination, and even genocide of disadvantaged and oppressed people. Notorious historical instances include the abhorrent Nazi medical experiments,<sup>16</sup> the egregious biological warfare perpetrated by Japanese Military Medical Unit 731 in Manchuria,<sup>17</sup> and the covert, nonconsensual sterilizations of Indigenous American women of childbearing age undertaken by the

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12. Sari Alschuler, “Humanities” in *Keywords for Health Humanities*, ed. Sari Alschuler, Jonathan M. Metz, and Priscilla Wald (New York: New York University Press, 2023), 109.

13. Thomas R. Cole, Nathan S. Carlin, and Roald A. Carson, *Medical Humanities: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Craig Klugman and Erin Gentry Lamb, eds., *Research Methods in Health Humanities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

14. Samuel Dubal, “Humanity,” in *Keywords for Health Humanities*, 115.

15. Lesa Scholl, “Introduction: Medicine and Modernity,” in *Medicine, Health and Being Human*, ed. Lesa Scholl (London: Routledge, 2018), 10.

16. Scholl, “Introduction: Medicine and Modernity,” 8.

17. Ruth Rogaski, “Vampires in Plagueland: The Multiple Meanings of *Weisheng* in Manchuria,” in *Health and Hygiene in Chinese East Asia: Policies and Publics in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. Angela Ki Che Leung and Charlotte Furth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 132–59; Tsuneishi Keiichi, “Unit 731 and the Japanese Imperial Army’s Biological Warfare Program,” in *Japan’s Wartime Medical Atrocities: Comparative Inquiries in Science, History, and Ethics*, ed. Jing-Bao Nie, Nanyan Guo, Mark Selden, and Arthur Kleinman (London: Routledge, 2010), 23–31.

# “The Most Calming Thing You Have Done on the Internet”

## Healing Vlogs and the Aesthetics of Li Ziqi

Lilian Kong

“Healing” has become a powerful commodity label and popular culture niche. Holistic wellness practices have been passed down for centuries across multiple cultures, but widespread commercial consumption of media for healing purposes holds a shorter history, traceable to late twentieth-century Japan. Especially in the 1990s, products ranging from relaxation toys to sound therapy took off, reflecting the impact of an economic bubble burst, subway gas attacks, and the 1995 Kobe earthquake. Whether self-promoted as “healing” or not, these products soothed consumers so effectively that marketers declared a nationwide “healing boom” in the early 2000s.<sup>1</sup>

The 2008 financial recession helped catapult this boom into global circulation, resonating with Euro-American self-care, slow living, and psychotherapeutic movements, as well as Mainland China’s own “healing culture” (*zhiyuxi wenhua* 治癒系文化) movement. In China, this movement is tied to three factors. First, psychology became an institutionally established field in the 1980s, incorporating mental health awareness into both Chinese traditional medicine and Western medicine practices.<sup>2</sup> Second, from the twenty-first century onward, popular discourses that express anxieties and desires—all inseparable from China’s reentry into the global market and subsequent privatization—skyrocketed. In the past decade, for example, the term “happiness fever” (*xingfu re* 幸福熱) became popular, signaling middle-class aspirations toward a meaningful life in the face of collective moral ambiguity

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1. Paul Roquet provides an overall account of twentieth-century Japanese healing booms, which culminated in this most pronounced, explicitly articulated “healing boom” of the 1990s. Paul Roquet, *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 151–52.
  2. Li Zhang, *Anxious China: Inner Revolution and the Politics of Psychotherapy* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press 2020), 41–43.

and financial instability.<sup>3</sup> Other viral terms such as “involution” (*neijuan* 內卷) or “inner depletion” (*neihao* 內耗) also articulate anxieties around overly competitive environments and lack of work-life balance.

Third and often overlooked in English-language research, China’s commercialized multimedia environment has provided its own conditions for healing. It is no coincidence that the term “healing” appeared early on through the publicity campaign of a romantic comedy film: Teng Hua-Tao’s *Love Is Not Blind* (*shilian sanshisan tian* 失戀33天, 2011) was advertised as “China’s first healing romance film.”<sup>4</sup> Chinese “healing culture” has since repurposed canonical literature, traditional art, cartoons, and other aesthetic media forms in a way that provides comfort to everyday lives, inspired by but rarely strictly adhering to medical or counseling practices.<sup>5</sup>

The mid-2010s witnessed the emergence of online healing media. Content creators on user-generated content platforms, at first mainly East Asian video bloggers (vloggers), began to brand themselves as “healing.” The label’s reach expanded with the increase of anxiety and depression during the COVID-19 pandemic, “public feelings” embroiled in the varied politics of crisis-ridden capitalist systems.<sup>6</sup> The pandemic has led to a mushrooming of more comforting online spaces: therapists on TikTok offer mental health tips, live streamers endorse “wholesome” or “cozy” video games, and YouTubers romanticize cottage living as a cure for burnout.<sup>7</sup> “Healing” has become an ever-lucrative, exponentially growing label in the global online platform economy.

3. Zhang, *Anxious China*, 134–35.

4. Wu Kang, “Qingnian qunti zhiyuxi wenhua liuxing xianxiang touxi,” *Qingnian tansuo*, no. 5 (2017): 95–96.

5. Wu, “Qingnian qunti zhiyuxi wenhua liuxing xianxiang touxi.”

6. The term “public feelings” is borrowed from Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). Cvetkovich was part of the early 2000s Public Feelings group that conceptualized negative emotions as public and political within American capitalist contexts, rather than as personally confined mental illnesses. Amid the also very political, public reactions to the pandemic, I expand this term beyond an immediate American context.

7. #therapytok is a TikTok video niche where licensed therapists and less professional content creators alike post mental health tips. Dani Blum, “Therapists Are on TikTok. And How Does That Make You Feel?” *New York Times*, May 7, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/12/well/mind/tiktok-therapists.html>. “Wholesome” or “cozy” video games separate themselves from more action-focused video games, instead often described and promoted as cute, casual, and uplifting. They skyrocketed in popularity during and after 2020, in part due to the 2020 founding of a live stream that curates wholesome games, Wholesome Direct. For more on the Cottagecore trend, see Ambar Pardilla, “What Is Cottagecore? Meet The Biggest Trend During Quarantine,” *Huffington Post*, September 11, 2020, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/cottagecore-trend-quarantine-diy\\_1\\_Secd875ec5b6e3f6739dbdfc](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/cottagecore-trend-quarantine-diy_1_Secd875ec5b6e3f6739dbdfc), and Isabel Slone, “Escape into Cottagecore, Calming Ethos for Our Febrile Moment,” *New York Times*, March 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/10/style/cottagecore.html>.

As a flourishing label, however, online healing media encompass an overwhelming array of approaches to holistic well-being, which attract varied users and consumption habits. How do we theorize the way such a heterogenous category heals? One productive method is virtual ethnography, which assesses viewer demographics, experiences, and opinions. While I take online comments of healing affects into account, my chapter focuses on how much these affects are themselves stylistic constructions, part of an online media aesthetic. Be it through layered ocean sounds or earth-toned cottage-living videos, online healing media engage primarily through its use of media-specific formats, as well as intermedial formal elements, which are not without their own effects or connotations. They generate sensorial fields for viewers to experience.

More concretely, I explore the aesthetics of healing vlogs, with a focus on Internet star Li Ziqi. Li is a vlogger who uploads videos of her making handicrafts, cooking from scratch, and performing other routines in rural Mianyang, Sichuan. Her signature style has catapulted her to global fame. Especially in 2020, the subscriber count on Li's YouTube channel doubled, earning her the Guinness World Record for most subscribers on a Chinese account. The reasons for Li's unprecedented popularity are many, but I analyze how "[this] quiet, resourceful farmer in China's southwestern countryside seemed to heal all wounds."<sup>8</sup> Considering such responses from critics toward her content, what formal techniques ground Li's capacity to "heal all wounds?" How do they engage specific vlogging formats and modes of online platform consumption to create their own functional media aesthetics, which reshape our understanding of online healing media's role?

I address these questions by teasing out three intertwined aspects of Li's videos: soft ambience, escapist impulse, and processual slowness. Each aspect is capable of capturing attention, the core currency of the platform economy, through therapeutic registers. They come together to immerse viewers in digital atmospheres of calm. Indeed, this chapter approaches Li's healing aesthetics through the framework of atmosphere. Indebted to Paul Roquet's theory of ambient media as well as Friedlind Riedel's emphasis on atmosphere as kinetic force field, my conceptualization of atmosphere places equal pressure on its simultaneously homogenizing and differential modalities. It is able to capture the immersive quality of Li's aesthetics without reducing their healing affects to a singular function. My chapter ultimately argues that Li's vlogs configure healing as an internally distributed atmospheric field. Rather than a "quick fix" cure for (mental) health issues,<sup>9</sup> then, healing becomes a

8. Cao Yurgel, "Li Ziqi: A Romantic in the Year of the Plague," *Sixth Tone*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1009177/li-ziqi-a-romantic-in-the-year-of-the-plague>.

9. This definition of "healing" is inspired by Jie Yang's critical analysis of psychotherapeutic practices in post-Mao China. Jie Yang, *Unknotting the Heart: Unemployment and Therapeutic Governance in China* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), xix.

process of perpetual calibration to the polarized tensions, desires, and affects that make up life under capitalist conditions. This process structures the affective framework of Li’s aesthetics and is furthermore embodied in online healing media’s own twin impulses of turning away from and profiting off of digital economies.

## Rural Vlogs, Healing Vlogs: The Rise of Li Ziqi

Li (legal birth name Li Jiajia) began making videos during difficult times.<sup>10</sup> Abandoned by divorced parents, Li lived with her grandparents in Mianyang, found a city job at fourteen, and returned to care for her grandmother in 2016. That year, she began uploading food-centered videos on the Chinese streaming platform Youku, quickly becoming a domestic online star (*wanghong* 網紅). Followers could not get enough of her graceful farming and cooking skills, as well as the splendor of her rural abode. By 2017, Li had turned this internet fame into a cross-platform brand. She developed Sichuan Ziqi Culture Limited Co. and commenced her now-terminated collaboration with multichannel network company Hangzhou Weinian. This collaboration led to “a rare leap for Chinese influencers” because both parties decided to upload Li’s videos to YouTube, hoping she could be “just as popular with a global audience.”<sup>11</sup> Two years later, this hope was realized.<sup>12</sup> She profited immensely as viewership from both Chinese and American servers skyrocketed,<sup>13</sup> eliciting commentary from a wide array of sources, including *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.<sup>14</sup>

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10. See Zhang Zijun, “Shidaorujin, cai zhenzheng kandongle Li Ziqi de shipin,” *Elle China*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.ellechina.com/celeb/gossip/a30991715/liziqi-20220219/>, “Behind the scenes with Li Ziqi, the mysterious Chinese internet celebrity with 58 million fans,” *South China Morning Post*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3027602/behind-scenes-li-ziqi-mysterious-chinese-internet-celebrity>, and “Exclusive Interview with Li Ziqi, China’s Most Mysterious Internet Celebrity,” Goldthread, Youtube, September 12, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J9CfVcXoYh4>.
  11. Oscar Schwarz, “Li Ziqi’s Online Pastoral Poetics,” *New Yorker*, August 4, 2023, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/rabbit-holes/li-ziqis-online-pastoral-poetics>.
  12. By the end of 2019, Li had a quarter million Weibo subscribers and 9 million YouTube subscribers.
  13. There have been educated estimates that Li earns around US\$24 million per year. Even if Li’s revenue is half of or a quarter of \$24 million, however, that is still a substantial income. “Chinese YouTube star Li Ziqi dismisses claim she makes US \$24 million a year,” *South China Morning Post*, January 10, 2020. For Li’s viewer demographics, see “YouTube Stats and Analytics for Li Ziqi,” *Hypeauditor*, accessed February 2022, [https://hypeauditor.com/youtube/li\\_zi\\_qi\\_liziqi-UCoC47doS20os\\_4DBMEFGg4A/](https://hypeauditor.com/youtube/li_zi_qi_liziqi-UCoC47doS20os_4DBMEFGg4A/).
  14. See Stephanie Wong, “The Life of Nostalgic Content: On Li Ziqi,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, February 12, 2022, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-life-of-nostalgic-content-on-li-ziqi/>; Tejal Ral, “The Reclusive Food Celebrity Li Ziqi is my Quarantine Queen,” *New York Times*, April 22, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/22/dining/li-ziqi-chinese-food.html>; Schwarz, “Li Ziqi’s Online Pastoral Poetics,” *New Yorker*, April 22, 2020.



Li's international success was lauded by official Chinese organizations,<sup>15</sup> a move that has made her relationship with the state a center of both scholarly and popular speculation.<sup>16</sup> My chapter, however, extends the significance of Li's fame beyond her speculated connections with the Chinese state. This section first outlines the state-market forces at play in the broader vlogging phenomena that contributed to Li's rise. I then both situate her vlogs within domestic and global capitalist platform economies and place her signature aesthetics in dialogue with national, regional, and transregional vlogging trends.

Chinese streaming platforms such as Youku and Tudou launched in 2005, spurring modest interest in vlog creation. But it was not until 2018, after vlogging's commercial potential became evident and domestic user-generated content became pervasively monetizable, that China experienced its own "vlogging boom." Vlog trends from the mid-2010s paved the way for this boom: just two years prior, a cluster of rural "microcelebrities"<sup>17</sup> had gained traction as they documented themselves performing tasks, such as catching fish or harvesting fruit. They take advantage of vlogging's autoethnographic format to position themselves as both "active bearers" and "witnesses" of rural culture.<sup>18</sup> Rural vloggers and local officials even worked together to transform villages into "wanghong villages," exporting specialty products and boosting tourism.<sup>19</sup> Witnessing this phenomenon in 2017, Xi Jinping

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15. To name two accolades, Li received an award from a state-sponsored newspaper and accepted an offer to serve as ambassador of the Communist Youth League. "Behind the scenes with Li Ziqi, the mysterious Chinese internet celebrity with 58 million fans," *South China Morning Post*, September 17, 2019.
  16. For English-language scholarship focused on Li's role as a cultural export, see Limin Liang, "Consuming the Pastoral Desire: Li Ziqi, Food Vlogging and the Structure of Feeling in the Era of Microcelebrity," *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images* 1, no. 2 (2022): 7–39 and Fangfei Wang, "Narrating China: Reading Li Ziqi and Fangfang from a Nationalist Perspective," Masters thesis (Duke University, 2021). For popular debates, see Lei Silin, "Li Ziqi zenme jiu bushi wenhua shuchu le," *WeChat Blog*, December 5, 2019, <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/NWEEIW2ntGbjUpKUJmHf3Q>; and "Liziqi yu Kongzixueyuan: wuyi jiangshu de 'Zhongguo gushi' yu lingren yanwu de 'wenhua shuchu,'" BBC, January 21, 2020, [https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-51191109?fbclid=IwAR1C1zLciB9RwInGbAjJLB DQX\\_rCB4fC6mEW9M6E0vpmtjvPziWWEH6TJc](https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-51191109?fbclid=IwAR1C1zLciB9RwInGbAjJLB DQX_rCB4fC6mEW9M6E0vpmtjvPziWWEH6TJc).
  17. This term is oft used in scholarship on the rural influencer phenomenon. See Limin Liang, "Consuming the Pastoral Desire: Li Ziqi, Food Vlogging and the Structure of Feeling in the Era of Microcelebrity," and Han Li, "From Disenchantment to Re-enchantment: Rural Microcelebrities, Short Video, and the Spectacle-ization of the Rural Lifescape on Chinese Social Media," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 3769–87.
  18. For an overview on autoethnographic creative practices, see Lisa Ortiz-Vilarelle, "Autoethnography and Beyond: Genealogy, Memory, Media, Witness," *Life Writing* 18, no. 4 (2021): 475–82.
  19. Li Xiangjuan, "'Wanghong cun' de zhifujing," *Fujian Daily*, May 20, 2020, [http://fjrb.fjzen.com/fjrb/html/2020-05/20/content\\_1259041.htm?div=-1](http://fjrb.fjzen.com/fjrb/html/2020-05/20/content_1259041.htm?div=-1).

called for rural youth to implement new media to lift their communities out of poverty.<sup>20</sup>

The popularity of these rural microcelebrities partially enabled Li’s rise, but their vlogs are stylistically at odds with Li’s. The formal techniques employed in rural vlogs are worth unpacking, so as to better situate Li’s vlogs within broader online self-documentation conventions. In Fisherman Ah Feng’s 2019 YouTube vlog, for example, rural vlogger Ah Feng sticks with a consistent mode of address. He stands in front of the camera and shouts from the seashore:<sup>21</sup> “Hi everyone, I’m Ah Feng! I’m going to look at the wine jars I buried yesterday and see if there are goods in store today!” He talks to and looks at us, using direct address to invite engagement and feedback. A 2019 tutorial video on Chinese platform Bilibili explicitly instructs vloggers to focus on direct address. The video outlines two building blocks of a successful vlog: the A-roll, where you narrate events while facing your camera, and B-roll, comprised of supplementary footage that mellow out gaps within your main narration.<sup>22</sup>

These expectations are not exclusive to Chinese vlogs. Instead, they reflect how widespread vlogging conventions have been across user-generated content (UGC) platforms.<sup>23</sup> At the turn of the century, online participatory networks had been lauded for fostering spaces of nonhierarchical communication. Scholarship since the mid-2000s has problematized such optimism,<sup>24</sup> but on UGC platforms, expectations for direct participation persist, for economic reasons. It is assumed that online influencers must rely on amicable, relatable self-branding and “quantifiable ‘assess[ments] of social values’” to maintain a fan base.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the expectation of

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20. Zhang Jinfeng. “Zimeiti shiyuxia xiangcun qingnian ‘zouhong’ xianxiang de chuanboxue tanjiu,” *Shiting*, no. 5 (2020): 210–12. His statement was followed by Three Rurals (*sannong* 三農) conferences that offered funding for rural content creators, see “Jinri toutiao jindaohui jihua: 5 yi butie sannong chuanguozozhe,” *EBRun*, July 8, 2018, <http://www.ebrun.com/20180703/284595.shtml>.
  21. “Afeng zhanshi shichuan yijiu de ganhai fangfa,” Yumin afeng, April 10, 2019, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CJkOzTVP\\_M&t=4s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3CJkOzTVP_M&t=4s).
  22. “Ruguo wo de shenghuo pingpingwuqi you zhiyou shouji name gai ruhe pai vlog ne?” Bushifuposhu. January 27, 2019, [https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ht411t7QG/?spm\\_id\\_from=333.788.recommend\\_more\\_video-1](https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1Ht411t7QG/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video-1).
  23. Both Chinese and English scholarship on vlogs also reinforce the centrality of direct address for vloggers, as well as live streamers and other content creators. See Bin Zhenyu, “Vlog Zhongguo fazhan xianzhuang yu qianjing qianxi,” *Shiting*, no. 3 (2019) and Jean Burgess and Joshua Green, *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2018).
  24. See José van Dijck, *The Culture of Connectivity: A Critical History of Social Media* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text* 18, no. 2 (2000): 33–58 and Robyn Caplan and Tarleton Gillespie, “Tiered Governance and Demonetization: The Shifting Terms of Labor and Compensation in the Platform Economy,” *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 2 (2020): 1–13.
  25. Brooke Erin Duffy, Annika Pinch, Shruti Sannon, and Megan Sawey, “The Nested Precarities of Creative Labor on Social Media,” *Social Media+ Society* 7, no. 2 (2021): 3.

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