



LUND UNIVERSITY

The Weight of Utopia

Navigating Digital Lifestyles and Local Livelihoods among
Minority Youth in Dali, China

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*You take delight not in a city's seven or seventy wonders, but in the answer
it gives to a question of yours.*

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*

Abstract

In recent years, the Chinese city of Dali has been intensely romanticised on digital platforms such as Rednote (Xiaohongshu) as a flawless sanctuary of slow living. This digital utopification emerges as a collective response to systemic urban hypercompetition and burnout. Rather than verifying the empirical truth of this destination image, this thesis investigates what utopification actively achieves as a social practice and how it is negotiated by those living within the utopified space. Utilising Ruth Levitas's framework of utopia as method across its archaeological, ontological, and architectural modes, the research adopts an entangled ethnographic design. It places a curated corpus of platform threads into direct dialogue with offline fieldwork centering on local ethnic minority Generation Z youth in Dali.

The interwoven analysis reveals a profound contradiction between a frictionless digital script and a friction-laden material reality. Archaeologically, the Dali imaginary powerfully diagnoses contemporary urban deficits, yet geographical relocation fails to dissolve internalised anxieties. Ontologically and architecturally, the platformed liberation of the urban sojourner is structurally underwritten by prior capital accumulation, strict aesthetic discipline, and the invisible maintenance labour of local residents. Furthermore, while the digital narrative instrumentalises local Bai youth as static ethnic backdrops, these individuals actively negotiate and hybridise these imposed identities in their everyday pursuit of economic survival. Ultimately, the thesis argues that the platformed utopia is a highly stratified social achievement. It offers privatised therapeutic relief for mobile urbanites while displacing the burdens of cultural performance and material maintenance onto local communities, thereby leaving the fundamental structural inequalities of the urban present undisturbed.

Keywords: utopification; platform imaginaries; digital ethnography; lifestyle migration; Chinese youth; contemporary China

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There is a certain irony in writing a thesis about utopia while living inside the very anxieties it seeks to diagnose. Like the urban youth I describe in these pages, I too have spent years navigating the relentless pressures of Chinese society—the involution, the exhaustion, the quiet but persistent feeling that the life one is living is never quite the life one was promised. When I scroll through social media and encounter narratives of slow living and effortless ease, I find myself caught between scepticism and longing. I know, intellectually, that such images are constructed. And yet some part of me reaches for them anyway. Writing this thesis did not resolve that tension. But it taught me to sit with it more honestly.

It was in Dali that something shifted. When I arrived for fieldwork, I expected to study a place. What I found instead were people—young Bai men and women who had spent years building their lives within the very space that others pass through in search of healing. They spoke to me about their pressures, their frustrations, and their quiet forms of resilience. They brought me into their homes, shared meals with their families around tables, and walked with me through fields and villages that never appear in any Rednote post. Those days and evenings are among the most vivid of my life. This thesis belongs to them first.

I also want to acknowledge two groups of people who may never read these words but who are present throughout them: those who, like me, live with urban anxiety and keep searching for somewhere to breathe; and those who labour inside the places the rest of us dream about, whose work makes the dream possible and whose lives the dream tends to forget.

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language and a culture not my own, and to keep going through two years that were sometimes lonely and always demanding. Crossing that distance was not a small thing.

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Introduction

Growing up just a three-to-four-hour drive from Dali, the city always existed in my mind as a familiar, rather ordinary neighbouring town. However, in recent years, my Rednote (Xiaohongshu) feed has been relentlessly flooded with a radically different version of Dali. Through the platform's algorithmic lens, Dali circulates less as a geographical place on a map than as a flawless, ready-made atmosphere. The feed is saturated with images of exquisitely decorated retro cafés, breathtaking views over Erhai Lake, and a life defined by *songchigan* (a sense of effortless relaxation) where time loosens its grip. This intense digital romanticisation triggered a strong sense of cognitive dissonance for me. When I visited Dali as a tourist about a decade ago, it was certainly scenic, but it was far from the hyper-aestheticised, frictionless paradise depicted online today.

Administratively, this study is situated in Dali City, the capital of the Dali Bai Autonomous Prefecture—the only Bai autonomous prefecture in China (People's Government of Dali Prefecture, 2026). By the end of 2025, Dali City had a registered household population of approximately 660,700 (People's Government of Dali City, 2026). The region is characterised by a concentrated multi-ethnic population dominated by the Bai ethnic group, who number approximately 446,600 and account for 67.60% of the total population, followed by the Han (24.40%), Yi (3.51%), and Hui (2.92%) (People's Government of Dali City, 2026). This specific demographic profile establishes a distinct cultural baseline for examining the lives and identity negotiations of local ethnic minority youth.

My curiosity deepened through ongoing conversations with a college friend—a local ethnic minority youth who returned to work in Dali after graduation. Hearing about his everyday life, the practical demands of his work, and the behind-the-scenes realities of the local economy completely shattered the Rednote filter. Through his experiences, it became strikingly clear that the lived reality of Dali is far from the effortless utopia consumed by urban sojourners. This stark double disconnect—between my own

memory and the algorithm, and between the digital fantasy and my friend's grounded reality—became the true starting point of this thesis. It prompted a critical question: Is Dali actually this utopian sanctuary? Or rather, what exactly is this platformed utopia trying to achieve, and whose everyday lives are being obscured to maintain its beautiful illusion?

Importantly, the overarching research problem of this thesis extends beyond Dali as a geographic destination. Instead, Dali functions as a methodological lens and a specific case study to investigate a much broader contemporary phenomenon. The intensity with which this narrative has proliferated signals that it cannot be read as a mere tourism trend. Its popularity emerges within a much wider context of systemic hyper-competition and performance-oriented selfhood, frequently condensed in contemporary Chinese public discourse through terms such as involution (*neijuan*), Key Performance Indicator (KPI)-logic, and burnout. Under these structural conditions, the profound desire for a “slow life” transcends a simple preference for leisure. It reflects a deeper crisis of livability in an “achievement society” (Han, 2015, p. 8), wherein young people experience time as permanently audited, personal value as endlessly conditional, and everyday life as increasingly difficult to inhabit without constant self-justification. In this macro-social context, the utopification of Dali functions as a collective pressure-release fantasy. It translates structural strain into a compelling image of spatial escape, making that escape feel both morally legitimate and practically executable.

Yet, the primary purpose of this thesis is not to verify whether Dali is empirically a utopia. Instead, it asks what the practice of utopification actively achieves as a social process. What does the platformed construction of the Dali utopia make visible about contemporary urban deficits, and what must it systematically smooth over in order to remain desirable and shareable? Most importantly, whose burdens are bracketed when the good life is rendered as an apparently frictionless lifestyle script? By approaching utopification as a socially consequential practice rather than a factual description, the thesis treats the Dali imaginary as a diagnostic and world-making device. Following Levitas’s (2013) conceptualisation of utopia as a method, the research approaches these

digital narratives as tools that organise desire, legitimise particular forms of personhood, and draft practical templates for living otherwise.

To robustly address these questions, the study brings into the same analytical frame two actors who are typically kept apart in the platform story, namely Rednote's digital imagination and the grounded lived realities of local ethnic minority Gen Z youth in Dali. This scope is not incidental. The frictionless myth of spatial escape becomes analytically legible only when read from the standpoint of those who inhabit the utopified space as a site of work, obligation, and negotiation rather than as an elective refuge. Local minority youth are positioned at the crucial hinge of this process. They encounter the Dali utopia not only as a circulating digital narrative but as an everyday physical environment fundamentally reshaped by it. Furthermore, they are frequently required to participate in sustaining its therapeutic atmospheres through hospitality, service encounters, and forms of invisible aspirational labour. Reading platform depictions alongside these situated experiences therefore introduces the central tension that structures the thesis. It exposes the stark contrast between an online utopia designed to be consumed as effortless relief, and an offline reality in which livability is unevenly distributed and frequently sustained through the very labour and constraints that the platform format tends to erase.

To systematically investigate the tensions outlined above, this thesis pursues three interconnected aims. First, it seeks to understand how the Dali imaginary is produced as a platformed cultural script through which urban pressure is diagnosed and spatial escape is made morally intelligible. Second, it aims to demonstrate how this digital script is encountered, negotiated, and occasionally contested in everyday life by those who inhabit the utopified space, with particular attention to local ethnic minority Gen Z youth. Third, it aims to specify the hidden socio-material conditions that allow the utopian promise to appear operational online, revealing the structural inequalities that this promise tends to smooth over offline.

These objectives culminate in the following overarching research question: How is the “Dali utopia” constructed on digital platforms, and how is this imaginary negotiated,

sustained, and contested by local youth in everyday material practice?

To effectively investigate this central inquiry, the research is guided by three specific sub-questions. These questions are directly derived from Ruth Levitas's (2013) framework of 'Utopia as Method'—specifically its archaeological, ontological, and architectural modes—which serves as the core analytical protocol for this study and will be elaborated upon in subsequent chapters:

1. The Archaeological Dimension: What contemporary urban deficits does the digital utopification of Dali attempt to diagnose and escape?
2. The Ontological Dimension: What forms of alternative subjectivity are authorised online, and how do they conflict with or instrumentalise the lived identities of local minority residents?
3. The Architectural Dimension: What hidden socio-material dependencies and labour conditions are required to render this utopian lifestyle operational in offline reality?

Theoretically, the analysis is structured through Ruth Levitas's (2013) *Utopia as Method*. By applying Levitas's archaeological, ontological, and architectural modes, the thesis utilises utopia not merely as a descriptive concept, but as a coherent analytical protocol for reading how social imaginaries diagnose the present, shape personhood, and draft actionable living arrangements. To ground this analysis empirically, the thesis places a carefully curated corpus of Rednote threads into direct dialogue with offline ethnographic material gathered in Dali. This design allows the thesis to track how utopian scripts circulate and acquire persuasive force online, while simultaneously revealing how they are practically inhabited, materially subsidised, or structurally disrupted in offline contexts.

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows. The literature review examines prior research on platformed destination imaginaries, lifestyle migration, and ethnic minority visibility, subsequently introducing the theoretical toolbox that informs the analysis. Following this, the methodology section details the research design, data

collection processes, and ethical considerations. The empirical core of the thesis is organised around Ruth Levitas's three modes of utopian inquiry. This analytical section reads Rednote material in constant dialogue with ethnographic fieldwork to demonstrate how Dali is utopified as a social diagnosis, a site of subject-making, and a socio-material blueprint. Finally, the conclusion synthesises the overarching findings, reflects on the researcher's positionality and methodological limitations, and outlines broader implications for understanding platformed utopianism beyond the specific case of Dali.

Literature Review

Previous Research

This research area looks like a dynamic intersection of digital culture, tourism geography, and ethnic studies. It is characterised by a dialogue between foundational theories of the “tourist gaze” and recent empirical inquiries into post-pandemic digital escapism on platforms like Rednote (Xiaohongshu). Across these strands, a recurring concern is how platform infrastructures and visual conventions reshape not only the representation of destinations, but also the social meanings attached to mobility, identity, and “the good life.” In platform environments, the “gaze” is increasingly organised through algorithmic visibility, aesthetic templates, and monetised attention that structure what becomes seeable, desirable, and valuable.

This platformed pursuit of a “good life” is not an isolated phenomenon. It can be understood within the broader frame of “modern social imaginaries.” Taylor argues that a social imaginary is not simply a set of abstract theories. Rather, it is the deeper way in which ordinary people imagine their social existence and social relations: how they fit together with others, how things normally work, what expectations are taken for granted, and what deeper normative ideas and images underpin these expectations. These understandings are often carried in images, stories, and legends (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). For Taylor, social imaginaries matter because they form a widely shared background understanding that makes common practices possible and produces a shared sense of legitimacy (Taylor, 2004, pp. 23-25). This concept is useful for understanding how platformed place narratives can function as shared moral-aesthetic backgrounds through which aspirations and evaluations of “the good life” become legible.

A growing body of research examines how lifestyle platforms govern visual self-presentation by rewarding particular “aspirational” aesthetics and disciplining how everyday life is made visible. On Xiaohongshu (Rednote), Guo (2022, p. 314)

conceptualises Xiaohongshu as a powerful platform that uses algorithmic tools and Multi-Channel Network (MCN) incorporation to platformise creators' entrepreneurial labour. She argues that creators' "aspirational labour practices" are shaped by platform affordances and strong algorithmic systems, even as the platform imposes regulations and restrictions to commercialise such labour. Importantly, these interventions are discursively justified as a "necessary and moral intervention".aligned with state policy orientations toward platforms and the wanghong industry, which refers to China's internet celebrity and content creator economy. From a labour perspective, Yi and Xian (2024, p. 20) conceptualise RED/Xiaohongshu's content creation economy through "informal labor," arguing that platform mechanisms and marketer–platform relations informalize content creation work and render it invisible, even when it is part of paid, standardised workflows—so that promotional labour can appear as "spontaneous" and "ordinary" user posts. Read together, these studies suggest that what appears as spontaneous personal sharing is often the outcome of platform-conditioned aesthetic and commercial labour. Such governance shapes not only creators' self-presentation but also the place-based imaginaries that are most likely to be rewarded and circulated as "good life" backdrops.

Another frequent area is the study of lifestyle migration to Dali. Sun and Xu (2017, pp. 67-68) show that lifestyle entrepreneurs' mobility toward Dali/Lijiang is structured by push–pull motivations: many leave high-pressure urban lives to "escape" and "change lifestyle," and are drawn by a slower pace, a relaxed atmosphere, and a more self-controlled everyday life. Su's (2023, pp. 132–136) account of lying flat-ism as an anti-involution, non-violent refusal helps contextualise why some young people may seek out places imagined as lower-pressure lifeworlds. Building on this, these studies suggest lifestyle migration to destinations such as Dali as potentially aligned with these desires for respite and autonomy, although the specific spatial dynamics require dedicated empirical study. Yu, Zhang, and Hannam (2025, p. 2442) analyse the "Dalifornia" phenomenon by showing how mobile entrepreneurs deploy geo-arbitrage, earning income tied to higher-tier urban markets while basing everyday life in lower-

cost places such as Dali. They frame this practice as part of a digital-nomad lifestyle aligned with remote work, mobile platforms, and neoliberal entrepreneurial logics.

Research on local responses increasingly shifts attention from economic adaptation to complex negotiations of visibility and identity. Lin and de Kloet (2019, p. 4) introduce the notion of an “unlikely creative class” to describe how Kuaishou enables predominantly rural and lower-tier city youth to gain visibility and perform vernacular creativity through short-video production. More recently, Liu and Fan (2026, pp. 1-2) show that rural Douyin creators operate under a platformed urban gaze that disciplines what counts as “authentic” rurality through visibility moderation, audience cueing, and local respectability norms. Within this gaze (Liu and Fan, 2026, pp. 7-8), creators are nudged toward bucolic packaging—pastoral, upbeat, aesthetically coherent depictions—while also inserting selective, micro-resistant displays of competence and modernity to counter condescending readings of rural life as naïve or “behind.” Zhu (2018, pp. 82-83) describes a form of staged authenticity in heritage tourism in which rituals and cultural practices are shortened, embellished, and tailored to an ‘external public’, and where cultural elements are reworked through processes of customization to match tourist tastes. Taken together, these studies complicate celebratory narratives of platform empowerment by foregrounding the structural conditions under which visibility is gained—often requiring strategic performance, selective disclosure, and the conversion of culture into platform-friendly forms.

Taken together, existing empirical scholarship shows that how platform infrastructures and commercial relations shape visibility and aesthetic norms, how lifestyle mobility to places like Dali is tied to moral-aesthetic critiques of urban modernity and to platform-enabled livelihoods, and how local rural/minority actors gain conditional visibility by performing legible forms of authenticity. However, these strands are often analysed separately, leaving underexplored what happens where platformed utopian place imaginaries intersect with local subjectivities and identity negotiation.

While the empirical studies reviewed above map platform labour, lifestyle mobility, and local visibility regimes, a parallel body of scholarship in utopian studies offers the conceptual tools needed to interpret how such imaginaries function as diagnoses of the present, projections of desirable selves, and visions of actionable futures. Because these works are primarily theoretical rather than empirical, I develop them in the Theory section, where they form the analytic toolbox for interpreting the Rednote corpus and field materials.

Against this current status of research, I will focus on the specific intersection of minority youth, utopian narratives, and platformed self-presentation, because there is a gap. Existing literature tends to separate two lines of inquiry. One line tracks how Dali becomes an aspirational destination imaginary. This moves from lifestyle migration accounts that emphasise escape from high-pressure urban life and the pursuit of an alternative “good life,” to post-pandemic discussions of tangping/anti-involution sensibilities and platform-enabled forms of mobility such as geo-arbitrage and digital nomadism. Another line examines how local rural and minority populations enter platform economies of visibility, foregrounding both new opportunities and the structural conditions of recognition, such as platformed urban gazes, staged authenticity, and the conversion of culture into platform-legible forms, often under policy and market pressures. Importantly, while utopian studies has extensively theorised utopian imaginaries as a method and as socially meaningful “dreaming” (Levitas, 2013, pp. 153-154; Sargent, 1994, p. 3), utopia research has not sufficiently examined how such imaginaries become platformed practices. Specifically, it examines how algorithmic visibility, aesthetic templates, and influencer/marketing infrastructures shape the production and circulation of “therapeutic” place-utopias, nor how local minority youth strategically navigate these platformed utopian narratives in everyday identity negotiation. While each line is well developed on its own, we still know relatively little about what happens where they meet: how minority Gen Z youth, positioned simultaneously as local subjects and as active users/creators on lifestyle platforms like Rednote, interpret and strategically work with the “therapeutic utopia” circulating

around Dali. Specifically, there is a lack of empirical research on the subjective and psychological tension involved in negotiating platform-aesthetic demands and algorithmic persona-making while living within the socio-economic realities that such utopian imaginaries often bracket or aestheticise. By bringing these two strands into one analytical frame, this thesis bridges the divide between studies of utopian place imaginaries and studies of platformed minority visibility, showing how utopification operates not only as a destination narrative for mobile outsiders but also as a situated method of identity negotiation for minority youth navigating the frictions between platform performances and lived subjectivity.

Theory

Theoretical Orientation: Why Utopification Matters

Theoretically, this thesis starts from the premise that utopian depictions are not neutral representations of place, but socially meaningful practices through which participants diagnose perceived lacks in the present, articulate desires, and rehearse images of “the good life.” In this sense, the point of studying the platformed “utopification” of Dali is not to verify whether Dali is “really” utopian, but to explain what this utopianising practice does for those who produce and circulate it. Specifically, I investigate how it functions as a resource for identity work, social critique, and motivation, and how it reveals what becomes desirable and valued in contemporary China.

In order to analyse my empirical material, I draw on a toolbox of interlocking perspectives. First, Ruth Levitas’s “utopia as method” provides the core analytic scaffold for mapping utopian work across three modes: the archaeological (utopia as a diagnosis of what is missing or intolerable in the present), the ontological (the kinds of selves and forms of flourishing made desirable), and the architectural (how an alternative lifeworld is imagined as livable through arrangements, infrastructures, and practical scripts) (Levitas, 2013). Second, Harvey’s work on spatiotemporal utopias pushes the analysis beyond static representation toward the processual reproduction of

imaginaries as they move between discourse, spatial practice, and everyday life, foregrounding how utopian visions can be sustained through iterative circuits rather than existing as finished blueprints (Harvey, 2000).

Third, to connect utopian imaginaries to the politics of the future, I draw on concepts that theorise utopia as a motivational horizon rather than mere escapism. Giddens's discussion of "utopian realism" provides a language for analysing future-oriented visions under conditions of high uncertainty, and his distinction between emancipatory politics and life politics helps frame utopian depictions as projects of self-actualisation and "how to live" (Giddens, 1990). Toulmin's notion of "futureables" complements this by highlighting how actors identify practical horizons and actionable futures, a lens that is particularly useful for interpreting the "how-to" genres through which platform users translate aspiration into repeatable pathways (Toulmin, 1992). Where relevant, I treat broader accounts of instability and competitive pressure (e.g., Turchin's discussion of structural insecurity and frustrated expectations) as sensitising concepts that help situate why utopian longings may intensify, without reducing the analysis to a single macro-causal explanation (Turchin, 2023).

Fourth, to specify "whose utopia" is being constructed and with what uneven consequences, I draw on standpoint theory. Harding's concept of strong objectivity provides a framework for treating knowledge-making as socially situated and for foregrounding perspectives that are often marginalised in dominant imaginaries (Harding, 1991). This is analytically decisive for my focus on minority Gen Z youth, who are positioned at the intersection of local lifeworlds and platformed utopian scripts, and whose accounts can make visible the tensions and costs that idealised place narratives may bracket or aestheticise.

Finally, two additional conceptual lenses help contextualise the cultural work performed by Dali-utopias. Taylor's notion of social imaginaries provides a vocabulary for analysing how shared, affect-laden understandings of "how life can be" become collectively recognisable and legitimate (Taylor, 2004). Meanwhile, debates on

“quality of place” and the uneven effects of place branding (e.g., Florida’s work on lifestyle-oriented place attractiveness and associated inequalities) sensitise the analysis to how utopian place narratives can be entangled with classed mobility, value reallocation, and differential access to the “good life” (Florida, 2012; Florida, 2014). Together, these perspectives allow the thesis to treat platformed utopification as a socially situated practice that mediates between desire and critique, aspiration and constraint, and symbolic imaginaries and lived realities.

Utopia as Method: Levitas’s Three Modes

Levitas (2013) argues that utopia should be treated as a heuristic method rather than a mere goal, offering a systematic way to analyse how imaginaries of better futures are produced, contested, and embedded in social life. In *Utopia as Method*, she develops three interconnected modes—utopia as archaeology, utopia as ontology, and utopia as architecture—which serve as the structured analytic framework for this thesis.

First, the archaeological mode treats utopian narratives as a diagnostic of the present: they make visible what is experienced as missing, intolerable, or unliveable. Levitas describes this as the “piecing together” of the images of the good society that are implicit in political and social discourse (Levitas, 2013, p. 153). Applied to my material, this mode guides a reading of Dali-utopias as critiques-in-disguise: the repetition of keywords such as “slowness,” “healing,” and “freedom” can be analysed as a negative imprint of what participants perceive as oppressive in high-pressure urban life (e.g., involution, exhaustion, and meaning deficit).

Second, the ontological mode asks what kinds of persons are produced and valued—and what forms of human flourishing are enabled or suppressed by particular social arrangements and the norms of “what seems to be normal.” (Levitas, 2013, p. 175) Here, Dali-utopias are analysed as projects of subject formation: they propose desirable ways of being (a calmer self, a “free” self, an entrepreneurial-yet-unhurried self) and delineate what counts as a life worth pursuing. This is especially pertinent for Minority

Gen Z youth, for whom utopian imaginaries intersect with ethnic identity, aspirations of modern competence, and the desire to be seen as both culturally distinct and socially capable.

Third, the architectural mode treats utopia as a practical imagination of arrangements and infrastructures: how an alternative lifeworld is envisaged as buildable, livable, and repeatable (Levitas, 2013, p. 197). In my study, this mode directs attention to platform infrastructures and aesthetic templates. Because the empirical site is Rednote (Xiaohongshu), the “architecture” of utopia is not only physical (Dali as a place) but also digital: algorithmic visibility, interface design, and influencer infrastructures shape which utopian aesthetics circulate and stabilise.

A related line of scholarship in utopian studies treats utopia less as a fixed place to be verified and more as a critical practice of imagining alternatives and diagnosing present lacks. While the three-mode scaffold of “utopia as method” has been introduced above, it is important to foreground Levitas’s explicit framing of the archaeological task as “the imaginary reconstitution of the models of the good society underpinning policy, politics and culture” (Levitas, 2013, p. 154). This emphasis supports reading utopian discourse as evaluative and world-making: it makes legible what is judged missing or intolerable and reconstructs the moral horizons through which “the good life” becomes thinkable.

This methodological orientation also resonates with broader arguments that utopian imaginaries can be politically productive rather than merely fanciful. Harvey, for instance, suggests that critical reflection entails “confronting the hidden utopianism and resurrecting it in order to act” (Harvey, 2000, p. 159), drawing attention to the practical and processual stakes of utopian thinking. At the same time, utopianism is not only an image of place but also a form of “social dreaming”—visions and anxieties about how social life might be arranged differently (Sargent, 1994, p. 3). Sargent’s notion of “intentional communities,” defined as co-residential groups pursuing shared values or

purposes (Sargent, 1994, p. 15), is useful here as a sensitising concept for thinking about how place imaginaries can organise communal aspirations and belonging.

Taken together, these contributions justify treating “Dali-as-utopia” not simply as a destination representation but as an imagined reconstitution of the good life that can orient spatial aspiration, enable community imaginaries, and shape identity projects.

Utopian Space as Process: Harvey and the Spatiotemporal Reproduction

While Levitas provides the functional modes, David Harvey’s intervention is useful for pushing the analysis beyond static “representation” toward the spatiotemporal reproduction of utopian imaginaries. In *Spaces of Hope*, Harvey (2000) emphasizes the necessity of “confronting the hidden utopianism and resurrecting it in order to act as conscious architects of our fates” (p. 237). He argues against treating utopia as a closed spatial form, instead conceptualising it as a spatiotemporal process.

In this thesis, Harvey’s processual lens is used to examine how utopian place imaginaries are reproduced through iterative circuits linking platform representation and mobility practices—how online posts can orient aspiration, how aspiration can relate to movement and everyday experimentation, and how these experiences may then be re-articulated through platform genres.

Motivational Utopias and Future-Oriented Agency

The urgent desire for “utopia” can be interpreted through Peter Turchin’s (2023) structural analysis in *End Times*. Turchin argues that many periods of instability are shaped by a combination of pressures from below and from above. On the one hand, he describes a “wealth pump” that “takes from the poor and gives to the rich,” weakening the material security of ordinary people and intensifying feelings of insecurity. On the other hand, he introduces the idea of “elite overproduction,” in which a growing number

of “elite aspirants” compete for a limited supply of elite positions, producing frustrated expectations, status anxiety, and conflict within the upper strata (Turchin, 2023). Under such structural imbalance, younger generations can experience strong downward pressure and a heightened sense that the conventional routes to a stable and respected life no longer work as promised. This macro-structural account provides one possible frame for interpreting why utopian longings and ‘escape’ narratives intensify under perceived instability and narrowed opportunity. It is not used to ‘explain’ Dali directly, but to sensitise the analysis to how insecurity and frustrated expectations may shape the appeal of alternative lifeworlds.

However, to label this utopian longing simply as escapism risks overlooking its potential significance within contemporary life politics. A more critical reading draws on Anthony Giddens’s discussion of “utopian realism.” In the section titled “Utopian Realism,” Giddens argues that future-oriented thought can help us “envisage alternative futures,” and that what is needed is the creation of “models of utopian realism” in a world of “high-consequence risks” and “no guarantees” (Giddens, 1990, pp. 154-155). He further suggests that such models of the good society must recognise that “emancipatory politics needs to be linked with life politics, or a politics of self-actualisation,” where emancipatory politics concerns liberation from inequality or servitude, and life politics concerns the pursuit of a fulfilling and satisfying life for all (Giddens, 1990, p. 156). Read through this framework, “Dali-as-utopia” can be analysed not only as withdrawal, but as a way of rethinking everyday life in relation to broader questions of freedom, inequality, and the kinds of lives people consider worth living. It is a strategic response to the structural pressures identified by Turchin (2023) when the “conventional” future is blocked, the imagination must carve out new, alternative trajectories.

This shift from passive “escape” to active “aspiration” is further clarified through Stephen Toulmin’s (1992) concept of “futureables.” Toulmin (1992, p. 203) suggests that facing the future requires an imaginative attitude that identifies “practical horizons”

rather than "backing into" the future through nostalgia. In this sense, the "sense of the future" (Giddens, 1990) generated on these platforms acts as a cognitive tool for navigating structural precarity. By visualizing a "livable" alternative, youth are able to maintain a sense of agency in an era of "elite overproduction" and diminishing returns (Turchin, 2023). Levitas (2013, p. 175) supports this by noting that the "ontological mode" of utopia asks what kinds of persons we might become. This lens allows the analysis to ask how such narratives propose that a "calmer," "freer," and more "authentic" self is not only desirable but technically possible through the affordances of the platform economy.

Platformed Place Branding, Class Mobility, and Uneven Effects

Building on this discussion of Dali's "utopification," it is difficult to avoid the logics of city branding and class-based mobility. In his account of the Creative Class, Florida (2012, p. 280) argues that people's decisions about where to live and work are strongly shaped by "quality of place," a term he coins to capture the distinctive set of characteristics that makes a place attractive. He differentiates "quality of place" from the more traditional idea of quality of life and summarises it across three interrelated dimensions: "what's there," meaning the combination of the built and natural environment; "who's there," meaning diverse kinds of people and the cues that one can make a life in that community; and "what's going on," meaning the vibrancy of street life, café culture, arts, music, and outdoor activities (Florida, 2012, p. 281). Read through this framework, Dali's recurring representation on platforms such as Rednote can be understood as a platformed packaging of "quality of place," presenting Dali as a slower-paced, culturally vibrant, and participatory way of life that appeals to some young people who seek alternatives to the pressures of large-city routines.

However, this platformed construction of "utopia" is often accompanied by problems of inequality and spatial reallocation. Reflecting on creative class theory, Florida notes that a key line of criticism concerns "economic inequality and gentrification" that can

accompany a rising creative class. He suggests that such changes may “raise their rents” and create “more low-end service jobs,” and that even when groups live in close physical proximity, they “do not intermix in any meaningful way” and may be “occupying separate universes” (Florida, 2014, pp. 201-202). Florida’s ‘quality of place’ lens helps interrogate how place becomes packaged as an attractive lifestyle asset, while critiques of inequality and gentrification sensitise the analysis to uneven effects: who benefits from increased symbolic value and visibility, and who bears the costs of spatial reallocation.

Whose Utopia? Standpoint Theory and Strong Objectivity

Finally, to address the politics of utopification, the thesis needs a theory of position: who is speaking, from where, and with what consequences. Standpoint theory is crucial here because Dali-utopias are not neutral; they are shaped by social location and power.

I utilise Sandra Harding’s concept of “strong objectivity.” Harding (1991) argues that maximizing objectivity requires bringing the cultural agendas and background assumptions that shape scientific claims into the research process for systematic critical scrutiny (p. 149). More broadly, her standpoint approach suggests that starting inquiry from marginalized lives can yield less partial accounts by making dominant assumptions visible and contestable.

For this thesis, standpoint theory enables a focused question: whose utopia is being constructed? Minority Gen Z youth in Dali occupy a unique standpoint: they are local subjects embedded in the realities that utopian imaginaries often aestheticise, yet they are also active digital agents navigating platform norms. This standpoint makes the tensions of utopification empirically observable: how they negotiate authenticity, manage the gaze of urban audiences, and selectively perform or resist the platformed scripts of the “good life.”

Integrating the Toolbox: How the frameworks will be used

Rather than treating these theories as separate explanations, I use them as complementary analytic lenses applied to the same empirical materials. Levitas provides the organising scaffold for the analysis chapters, while platform and mobility perspectives help specify how utopian imaginaries are shaped by infrastructures of visibility and by movement between online representation and lived practice. In the chapters that follow, I therefore analyse Rednote threads and field materials through Levitas's three modes, using additional concepts only where they sharpen a specific interpretive problem (e.g., circulation, actionability, or uneven effects). This keeps the theoretical discussion tightly linked to the empirical analysis, and avoids presenting the framework as a standalone "model" detached from the material.

Methodology and Fieldwork

Research Design and Rationale

This thesis is designed as a phronetic case study of “Dali-as-utopia,” and it advances a combined methodological tool that links case-study design to a structured protocol for interpretation. The central methodological finding of the project is that Flyvbjerg’s case-study logic and Levitas’s “utopia as method” can be productively assembled into a single analytical instrument for studying platformed imaginaries as both cultural critique and practical world-making. Rather than presenting these as separate methods, I treat them as interlocking components of one research architecture: the case study specifies why Dali is analytically revealing and how the inquiry is delimited, while utopia-as-method specifies how the empirical material is read systematically across archaeological, ontological, and architectural dimensions (Levitas, 2013, pp. 153-154; p. 175; p. 197). This combination is intended to do two kinds of broader work: it produces a transferable way of analysing how lifestyle platforms turn particular places into utopian scripts (applicable beyond Dali), and it uses Dali as a lens through which wider issues—platformed aspiration, the politics of everyday life, and the uneven distribution of “livability”—become empirically tractable.

Dali is selected as a strategically revealing case because it concentrates, in unusually visible form, the intersection of platformed “good life” narratives, mobility and tourism economies, and local minority youth positionalities. A case-study design allows the thesis to pursue interpretive depth rather than representativeness and aligns with phronetic inquiry’s concern with what is happening, for whom, and with what implications (Flyvbjerg, 2001, p. 60). Levitas’s method then provides the analytic engine for tracing how utopian depictions diagnose present lacks, reshape personhood, and draft socio-material arrangements for living otherwise, a process Levitas calls an “education of desire” oriented toward alternative possibilities of life (Levitas, 2013, pp. 14-15).

Empirically, the project adopts a multi-sited, digitally entangled qualitative design that

integrates digital ethnography on Rednote (Xiaohongshu) with offline ethnographic fieldwork in Dali. This dual approach is necessary because the thesis examines both the platformed circulation of Dali imaginaries and their offline reception, reinterpretation, and negotiation in everyday life. Rather than treating platform discourse and lived experience as separate domains, the project approaches them as mutually constitutive, aligning with Pink et al.'s claim that digital and material worlds are deeply entangled in the production of contemporary social reality (Pink et al., 2015, pp. 7-8). Following Marcus's (1995, p. 96) multi-sited ethnographic logic, the research traces how meanings and aspirations travel across settings rather than remaining confined to a single "site." Rednote is treated as both a discursive arena where utopian scripts are articulated and a platform environment in which platforms have become "central forces in the construction of sociality" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 23). At the same time, Dali is approached as a lived social space where such imaginaries are encountered, reworked, or resisted in practice. This design avoids a dualistic separation between the virtual and the physical by analysing platform-mediated aspirations as entangled with material geographies and embodied positionalities; as Graham argues, users remain "situated in real space," and ICTs generate hybrid geographies shaped by social, political, and economic conditions beyond the virtual realm (Graham, 2011, pp. 218-220).

This study is oriented toward interpretive depth and thick description. The aim is not to measure frequencies of themes, but to develop analytically rich, context-bound accounts of how utopian narratives function, including what they diagnose about the present, what kinds of selves they enable, and how they translate aspiration into actionable forms.

Digital Corpus Construction: Rednote Threads as Utopian Texts

Purposive Sampling and Theory-Driven Case Selection

The platform corpus consists of 12 Rednote threads selected through purposeful,

theory-informed sampling. The aim was not to assemble a statistically representative dataset, but to construct a small corpus of information-rich cases for in-depth analysis, generating insights and contextual understanding rather than empirical generalizations (Patton, 2015, p. 401). In practical terms, the sampling strategy was designed to ensure conceptual coverage across the three analytical dimensions derived from Levitas's framework, while remaining focused on threads with sufficient narrative and visual density for close interpretation.

To implement this framework in data collection, thread searches were organised into three keyword clusters corresponding to the study's three analytical dimensions.

The first cluster targeted threads centred on contrast, deficit, and urban exhaustion. Search terms included expressions associated with burnout, pressure, escape, "lying flat," and healing. In sampling terms, this cluster was intended to identify posts that framed Dali through explicit or implicit contrast with urban modernity and that articulated what participants felt was lacking, intolerable, or emotionally unsustainable in city life.

The second cluster targeted threads focused on selfhood, affect, and ways of being. These included posts that foregrounded emotional relief, authenticity, self-recognition, personality labels, or reflections on becoming a different kind of person in Dali. The aim here was to identify materials in which Dali was narrated not only as a place, but as a setting for imagining or legitimising an alternative self.

The third cluster targeted threads that translated aspiration into practical guidance. Search terms here focused on living costs, temporary relocation, café entrepreneurship, rental routines, and "how to live here" style advice. These posts were sampled because they rendered the Dali imaginary operational by breaking it down into budgets, routines, logistical instructions, and repeatable pathways.

Across all three clusters, keywords functioned as entry points rather than rigid filters. The goal was not to mechanically sort posts into fixed categories, but to locate threads in which one analytical orientation was especially pronounced.

Following the initial search process, candidate threads were reviewed iteratively through close reading. Threads were included in the final corpus only when they met four criteria. First, they had to be explicitly anchored in Dali as a specific socio-spatial setting, rather than in generic Yunnan tourism. Second, they had to contain substantial text–image coupling, allowing for multimodal interpretation of how place meanings were constructed across verbal and visual registers. Third, they had to display a discernible utopian function, such as contrastive diagnosis, subject formation, or practical world-building, rather than functioning merely as logistical travel information. Fourth, they had to contain sufficient narrative density to support interpretive analysis, for example through a clear storyline, explicit evaluative language, or a coherent affective framing.

The resulting corpus was therefore not treated as a population sample, but as a small set of analytically strategic cases through which the platformed production of “Dali-as-utopia” could be examined in depth. Each selected thread served as an entry point into broader patterns of representation, circulation, and actionability, while remaining grounded in the interpretive logic of close reading rather than formalised large-scale coding.

Data Capture, Management, and Ethical Considerations

All Rednote materials were captured and organised in a dedicated database that served as the project’s central qualitative archive. The database enables systematic cross-thread comparison while maintaining a transparent relationship between raw material, interpretive memos, and analytic decisions. Each thread in the corpus was logged as a single record with an internal identifier (T1–T12) and the following fields: posting date, URL link, selected “Key Quotes,” a “Visual Cues” description of salient multimodal features, and an analytical memo. Translation of Chinese key quotes into English was treated as an interpretive practice rather than a mechanical transfer, with attention to preserving culturally specific affect and meaning (Temple and Young, 2004, p. 164). This structured capture supports credibility by keeping data, context, and analytic

processes visible and well documented (Tracy, 2010, p. 840).

In the written analysis, Rednote materials are referenced using the format (Thread #) when specific wording, narrative elements, or visual details are discussed. This simple identifier links claims directly back to the archived record while avoiding unnecessary platform metadata in the main text. Analytically, each thread was read through Levitas's three modes of "utopia as method," used as a theory-driven coding heuristic rather than a rigid coding matrix. Following a directed content analysis logic, one primary mode (archaeological, ontological, or architectural) was assigned to each thread to indicate its dominant utopian function; secondary elements were noted in memos rather than formalised as additional codes (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005, p. 1281). This approach keeps the corpus analytically manageable while preserving interpretive transparency.

Ethical handling was built into the capture and storage protocols. Although Rednote is public-facing, users may still operate with expectations of contextual privacy. Usernames, profile images, and precise geolocal or biometric markers were therefore not reproduced in the thesis; database records focus on discursive and visual content rather than personal identifiers. All screenshots and notes were stored on a password-protected local drive with restricted access, balancing analytic transparency with data minimisation and harm reduction.

Analytical Framework: Utilising Levitas's Modes

To avoid reiterating the theoretical premises established in the Literature Review, this section outlines how Levitas's (2013) "utopia as method" is applied as an interpretive protocol for analysing Rednote data. Rather than functioning as a rigid coding matrix, the framework provides three distinct reading lenses that specify what to look for in threads and how to distil multimodal cues into sociological insights. Under the archaeological lens, posts are read as diagnostic contrasts that reconstruct perceived lack in the urban present. The analysis therefore extracts explicit and implicit urban deficit markers—pressure, burnout, involution, emotional depletion—as well as recurrent temporal and sensory oppositions such as fast versus slow, crowded versus

spacious, instrumentalised routine versus everyday ease. Under the ontological lens, the analysis traces how posts attach Dali to desirable forms of selfhood and flourishing. Cues include first-person self-descriptions, vocabularies of authenticity and freedom, moralised affect (relief, calmness, self-acceptance), personality labels, and visual performances of bodily ease, unhurried presence, or aestheticised everyday life. Under the architectural lens, the analysis focuses on how aspiration is translated into practical scripts and world-building devices—cost breakdowns, rental/relocation advice, routine descriptions, small-business imaginaries, and step-by-step guidance for staying, working, and living in Dali. Platform-specific devices (comment Q&As, checklist-style captions, reproducible lifestyle templates) are treated as indicators of how utopian desire is made actionable and transferable.

Although a single thread may contain cues relevant to more than one lens, the analysis identifies one dominant orientation for each case to support cross-case comparison. This does not imply theoretical purity; it is a comparative device used to keep the corpus analytically manageable, while secondary elements remain visible through memos and are integrated into the written analysis where analytically relevant.

Executing Thick Description: From Digital Traces to Sociological Synthesis

While Levitas’s three lenses provide the main interpretive orientations, the analysis is carried out through thick description as a procedure that moves from close attention to multimodal detail to broader sociological explanation. In this thesis, thick description is executed through three linked moves. First, the analysis begins with micro-level extraction during close reading, attending to the interplay between caption and image and treating posts not as transparent “travel diaries” but as normative claims and moral diagnoses. This involves isolating salient linguistic features (for example, sequences of negation, evaluative adjectives, culturally loaded vocabularies) and reading visual elements (framing, colour temperature, scale, bodily placement, interior–exterior contrasts) as deliberate aesthetic strategies rather than neutral backdrops. This step

follows Denzin's account of thick description as an interpretive practice that produces "interpretations of interpretations," rather than transparent representations of the world (Denzin, 2001, p. 98).

Second, the analysis proceeds through meso-level theoretical anchoring, interpreting extracted cues in relation to broader conceptual problems rather than treating them as isolated description. At this stage, Levitas's modes remain the primary scaffolding, while additional concepts are mobilised only when they sharpen a specific analytical issue, such as how exhaustion and "unproductive time" are moralised, how authenticity is staged, or how routinised "how-to" posts translate aspiration into operational forms. In this way, individual threads function as small but revealing entry points through which wider temporal, moral, and social structures become analytically visible.

Third, to avoid a flat or overly romanticised account of the Dali imaginary, the analysis employs macro-level dialectical juxtaposition, intentionally placing idealised narratives alongside fractured or complicated ones. Methodologically, this follows the logic of analytic induction: seeking disconfirming cases that can refine emerging interpretations and add variability to the corpus (Patton, 2015, p. 864). Moments of friction are treated as a counter-archive that does not negate utopian desire but deepens the diagnosis, showing how longing can persist alongside disappointment when aspirations meet lived constraints.

Offline Fieldwork: Extending the Platform Analysis

This thesis complements the platform corpus with offline ethnographic fieldwork in Dali in order to examine how platformed utopian imaginaries are encountered, negotiated, and sometimes disrupted in everyday life. The overarching rationale is that "Dali-as-utopia" is produced through the entanglement of digital mediation and material practice, rather than existing in separate online and offline spheres (Pink et al., 2015, pp. 7-8). Accordingly, Dali is treated not as a site that "verifies" online representations, but as a lived social space where platformed life-scripts become folded into infrastructures, labour arrangements, and local social relations. Following

Marcus's (1995, p. 96) multi-sited ethnographic logic, the fieldwork traces how meanings and aspirations circulate across time and space, moving between Rednote posts, everyday places and interactions in Dali, and the ongoing re-inscription of experience back onto the platform.

Field site and participants

Fieldwork was conducted across sites repeatedly foregrounded in the Rednote corpus, including cafés, markets, sojourn neighbourhoods, and everyday mobility routes. The analytic focus was on how “Dali-as-utopia” is sustained through ordinary practices and social arrangements, with particular attention to Minority Gen Z youth who live and/or work within the spaces being utopified. This specific demographic was purposefully selected for two analytical reasons. First, focusing on ethnic minorities exposes the cultural politics of utopification. Because the platformed imaginary of Dali heavily relies on a romanticised, pastoral, and ethnicised aesthetic, it is the local minority population who bears the structural burden of performing or maintaining this “authenticity” for urban consumers. Second, focusing on Generation Z provides a crucial analytical symmetry. The recent exodus to places like Dali is largely a response to the pervasive crisis of “involution” (*neijuan*), a state described by anthropologist Xiang Biao as “a ceaseless cycle of self-flagellation” where individuals are locked in hyper-competition without actual growth (Xiang, cited in Liu, 2021). This structural pressure is particularly acute for Generation Z, a cohort that grew up in a world built by smartphones, high-speed internet, and social media (Dimock, 2019). Often referred to in China as the “post-95s” and “post-00s” or digital natives, they are a demographic fundamentally shaped by both digital fluency and unprecedented social pressure. Because local minority Gen Z youth inhabit the exact same platform ecosystems and understand these same generational anxieties as the urban sojourners, yet occupy fundamentally different structural positions, they serve as the ideal standpoint from which to expose the frictions of the utopian script.

To support methodological transparency and facilitate access, this study drew on my

previous experience and existing social networks. Approximately two years prior to this fieldwork, I lived in Dali for one month as a digital nomad and developed informal relationships with local Han residents. Along with a college classmate residing in the area, these contacts acted as “sponsors” who helped situate me within local social relations and enabled introductions to further participants, including members of the ethnic minority community (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, pp. 63-64). Building on these introductions, I then used a purposive snowball approach to recruit additional interviewees across relevant social positions. Additionally, I adopted a situated strategy to build rapport with Bai youth working in the service sector. By returning to the same cafés and restaurants across multiple visits, I was able to sustain contact and negotiate a workable role in the field over time, moving beyond one-off encounters toward relationships that supported naturalistic participant observation. This repeated presence also allowed the sampling focus and interview opportunities to develop iteratively as the fieldwork progressed, in line with ethnography’s exploratory character (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 4).

The study draws on semi-structured interviews and participant observation. In total, seven interviews were conducted. One interview yielded limited usable material and is therefore not quoted in the analysis, though it remains part of the overall fieldwork process. Participants were approached to reflect different positions within the utopian economy, including local residents and workers, small business operators, and mobile sojourners, enabling comparison across standpoints.

Data collection: participant observation, interviews, and fieldnotes

Offline data were generated through two mutually informing practices. First, participant observation documented everyday scenes relevant to the thesis’s core concerns, including work rhythms, café-based sociability, tourist–sojourner encounters, spatial atmospheres, and the labour required to sustain “slow life” as an everyday routine. Fieldnotes were written continuously to capture contextual detail, interactional dynamics, and analytic memos that link observed situations to emerging questions.

Second, semi-structured interviews explored how participants interpret Dali's utopian imaginaries, how they relate them to everyday constraints and aspirations, and how platform visibility and tourism economies shape opportunity structures and identity negotiations. Following established ethnographic principles, the fieldwork draws on multiple sources of data to develop in-depth contextual understanding (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 3).

Ethics, data handling, and appendices

Ethical considerations were addressed across both online and offline materials. Although Rednote content is public-facing, users may still have expectations of contextual privacy; therefore, usernames, profile images, and other personal identifiers are not reproduced in the thesis. For offline participants, interview excerpts are presented in a way that minimises identifiability, especially when discussing sensitive workplace experiences, income arrangements, or minority identity negotiations. For all offline participants, informed consent was secured through a reflexive and culturally appropriate process. Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews, participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the project's academic purpose, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time. Verbal informed consent was formally obtained and recorded before each interview session commenced, as presenting formal written consent forms was felt to be overly transactional or intimidating to some local service workers. During participant observation in semi-public spaces such as cafés, my identity as a university researcher was openly disclosed to key informants, and ongoing verbal consent was negotiated during informal interactions before documenting any fieldnotes. Digital materials (screenshots and database records) and offline materials (fieldnotes and interview transcripts) were stored securely with restricted access. To keep the thesis readable while maintaining transparency, the main text includes only the excerpts and observational episodes that are analytically mobilised. The interview guide is provided in an appendix, while extended fieldnotes are available on request rather than reproduced in full.

The Utopification of Dali: An Interwoven Analysis of Platform Representations and Ethnographic Fieldwork

This chapter analyses the phenomenon of the Dali utopia across both platformed representations and lived encounters. Organised according to Levitas's three modes of utopian inquiry (archaeological, ontological, and architectural), each section places Rednote threads in direct dialogue with offline ethnographic material. This grounded ethnographic data is utilised to thicken the description and to foreground the material conditions and social frictions through which these digital utopian scripts become liveable, contested, or unsustainable in everyday life. The analytical aim is not to verify the empirical truth of online depictions, but rather to understand what utopification achieves as a social practice, for whom it functions, and with what broader structural consequences. To foreground the lived textures of these narratives, direct quotations from both digital threads and ethnographic interviews are integrated as block quotes throughout the analysis. Platform excerpts have been translated and anonymised to protect user privacy, while the full interview transcripts remain fully documented and are available on demand. This approach ensures ethical compliance while robustly demonstrating the empirical realities of the field.

Archaeological mode: diagnosing the present through contrast

The archaeological mode in Levitas's (2013, p. 154) framework functions as a diagnostic tool, excavating the missing elements of the contemporary present. Applying this mode, this chapter explores how the Dali utopia is constructed as a direct spatial remedy for urban exhaustion and temporal discipline. By interweaving platform representations with ethnographic fieldwork, the core findings reveal a profound paradox. While the digital imaginary of Dali successfully functions as a powerful critique of urban burnout, the ethnographic reality demonstrates that this spatial escape

remains highly fragile. The utopification of Dali attempts to cure a structural problem with a geographical solution, yet fieldwork shows that the internalised pressures of urban competition inevitably travel with the subject.

To unpack this dynamic, the analysis proceeds in two steps. First, it examines the digital desire to reclaim “unproductive time,” using ethnographic accounts to corroborate how this temporal contrast exposes the deep alienation inherent in city life. Subsequently, the discussion complicates this healing narrative by documenting the persistence of urban anxiety within the utopian space, revealing how the promise of relaxation is ultimately constrained by unresolved structural and economic insecurities.

The archaeology of autonomy: reclaiming “unproductive” time

The archaeological work of defining a “good life” in these posts often begins with a refusal of urban temporal discipline. In Thread 1, the good life is narrated through a sequence of negations and substitutions:

In Dali, there is no need to wake up early. Strolling through the morning market under the brilliant sunshine, time passes as if it were entirely unimportant. This is the kind of city that allows us to see the life we truly want. (Thread 1)

The post intensifies the contrast by describing sunlight as a temporal force. Under brilliant sunshine, time passes following an entirely different rhythm from the city. This is not a neutral travel description, but a moral diagnosis. The city is implicitly positioned as a place where time matters too much, precisely because it is governed by obligation, discipline, and the pressure to remain productive.

In Taylor’s terms, this can be read as a reworking of the social imaginary. Rather than presenting a set of formal theories, the thread offers an often unspoken sense of how life could be lived. This is articulated through images and narrative details that shape expectations about how things go on (Taylor, 2004, p. 23). By making a different rhythm visually concrete, the post points toward a “futureable” in Toulmin’s sense, inviting an imaginative orientation toward what could be made possible rather than backing into the future through nostalgia (Toulmin, 1992, p. 203). Repeated verbs such

as wandering, strolling, and lingering construct a normative claim that time should be liveable. The post makes this explicit through its climactic line, stating that a city should allow us to see the life we want (Thread 1). In this analysis, Dali functions as a site where alternative everyday temporalities make visible what is missing in urban life. This is consistent with Ruth Levitas archaeological mode, which identifies absences within dominant constructions of the good society (Levitas, 2013, p. 154).

The visuals reinforce this archaeology through sensorial abundance. The thread foregrounds fruit stalls, warm-coloured sunshades, street vendors, and dense pedestrian flows. It also explicitly valorises the everyday “smoke-and-fire” atmosphere of ordinary life (*yanhuoqi*). The aesthetic work here is crucial. The market is not represented as disorderly or inconvenient, but as a scene of grounded vitality. In that sense, the post performs what might be called a positive archaeology. It exposes the sensory poverty of the city not by describing the urban environment directly, but by intensifying the texture of what city life is implied to have lost, namely warmth, density, and uninstrumental forms of presence.

Fieldwork accounts strongly corroborate this diagnosis by showing how the conceptual contrast between urban acceleration and local slowness is experientially grounded. The understanding of Dali as a temporal refuge is not exclusively a digital invention, but a comparative reality actively recognised by those who have navigated both worlds. Yu, a local landlady, structured her understanding of Dali’s slowness precisely through such comparison. Having spent years working in major cities including Beijing and Chengdu before returning home, her appreciation of Dali was shaped by a direct rejection of the urban pace. Her trajectory illustrates that the desire for “unproductive time” is formulated as a direct response to the exhaustion of urban labour. Similarly, local interlocutors like Chuan noted that the very sensation of “slowness” is a relational concept brought into sharp relief by outsiders arriving from large cities. For locals who have always lived in this environment, time simply unfolds normally. The intense romanticisation of “slowing down” belongs predominantly to urban sojourners who carry the weight of urban temporal discipline with them.

The thread therefore frames urban time as structurally compressed and continuously intensified, such that everyday rhythms are experienced as colonised by productivity and the scarcity of time itself (Rosa and Trejo-Mathys, 2013, pp. 151-152). Thread 1 presents Dali as a space where resonance is restored through contact with ordinary rhythms, where the self can be a sensing subject rather than an evaluated performer. The utopia here is not a grand political vision, but a culturally legible desire for time that is not fully captured by measurement and efficiency. Read together, the digital narrative and the ethnographic reflections clarify the true function of the archaeological mode. It reveals that the intense digital circulation of Dali's "unproductive time" serves as a collective societal diagnosis, exposing the profound temporal alienation embedded within the contemporary urban present.

The critical archaeology: the persistence of urban burnout inside the utopian space

Thread 4 complicates the narrative of a healing and relaxing Dali by documenting the frictions that idealised depictions often exclude. The post states that the beautiful fantasy of sojourning in Dali slowly fades away, explicitly marking the limits of a place-based cure. Despite physically relocating to Dali, the narrator finds it increasingly difficult to relax, describing an affective collapse into loneliness. The author admits to crying for the first time in Yunnan after returning to the room, overcome by a powerful sense of isolation. Alongside this emotional collapse, the post lists the practical difficulties of solo living, including social isolation, the discomfort of moving alone, cooking challenges, the fear of being outside late, and a profound disorientation regarding daily routines. These details function as a counter-archive to utopian imagery, making visible the everyday struggles that the Dali imaginary often brackets out in order to remain desirable and shareable.

In Levitas's archaeological mode, this counter-archive is analytically valuable because it exposes the blank spaces within prevailing images of the good society, interpolating the absent but implied elements that are usually kept silent (Levitas, 2013, p. 154). The

failed utopia depicted in Thread 4 therefore does not cancel the earlier desire for Dali. Instead, it deepens the diagnosis by demonstrating that the deficit being excavated is not only spatial but also profoundly relational and structural. Levitas emphasises that utopian projections are provisional and can generate disillusionment when what is imagined as final proves contingent in lived reality (Levitas, 2013, p. 18). Thread 4 exemplifies this contingency. The platform script promises that scenic beauty and distance from the city will naturally produce ease, yet the narrator encounters a different reality wherein solitude becomes vulnerability and free time transforms into empty time rather than restorative time.

Fieldwork clarifies the conditions under which this counter-archive emerges. Psychological relief after relocation is often temporary and highly conditional. Yang, who frequently interacts with long-term sojourners, observed that the initial sense of relaxation is highly precarious:

For many college students or young people who have only worked for a year or two, coming to live in Dali actually creates anxiety. Once you stay for a period of time and your savings bottom out, you will inevitably start to feel anxious. (Yang, 25, local Bai guesthouse manager)

The structural pressures they sought to escape are not magically resolved but are simply replaced by new, localised precarities. Yu, who spent years working in major cities before returning home, corroborated this skepticism toward the popular discourse of Dali as a pure space of escape:

Dali is not a place to escape pressure. It is merely exchanging one kind of pressure for another. (Yu, 28, local Bai landlady)

The thread can thus be read as a diagnosis of how urban burnout persists as an internalised relation to the self, even when the external geographic setting changes. In Han's terms, the achievement society replaces the logic of prohibition with the positivity of "Can," ensuring that pressure persists not as external coercion but as self-demand. Consequently, the compulsion to perform becomes internalised rather than simply imposed from the outside (Han, 2015, pp. 8-9). Thread 4 suggests that this

internalised demand travels with the subject. The narrator cannot simply receive slowness because their subjectivity remains structured by obligation, expectation, and continuous self-monitoring. Under conditions of intensified competition and frustrated expectations, anxiety becomes a durable trait that is not easily switched off by spatial mobility (Turchin, 2023). The loneliness and disorientation described in Thread 4 index how structural pressure can be lived as habit, dictating what the subject anticipates they must manage and justify. As a result, even scenic distance from the city fails to produce genuine ease.

Ultimately, Thread 4 performs critical archaeological work. It makes visible that the utopification of Dali depends on bracketing out not only the uglier realities of the physical place, but also the relational and economic conditions required for healing to be more than a passing mood. Dali emerges as a highly ambiguous site. It offers undeniable beauty and moments of relief, yet it simultaneously exposes the fragility of a modern subject expected to repair themselves through the solitary consumption of an alternative lifestyle. The fading fantasy is not an argument against the validity of utopian desire. Rather, it serves as compelling evidence of how deep the diagnosed urban deficit runs, and how unevenly the promise of livability can be sustained.

Synthesis: the diagnostic function of the Dali imaginary

Taken together, Threads 1 and 4 demonstrate that the utopification of Dali operates as a diagnostic pressure-release response to an environment of intense urban competition and self-discipline. Thread 1 produces a sharp contrast. It presents Dali as a world where time can be rendered unimportant, where everyday life is thick with sensory warmth, and where the good life is defined by an unforced rhythm. Thread 4 interrupts this smoothness by revealing that the fantasy can fade, loneliness can intensify, and the promised relaxation may not materialise simply by changing location. Yet, the two posts ultimately work together as an archaeological device. They identify the contemporary urban deficit as so profound that it generates both a fierce longing for unproductive time and a deep disappointment when this longing encounters lived difficulty.

Fieldwork helps specify what this fading fantasy looks like as an experience of expectation meeting constraint. Several interlocutors stressed that the perception of Dali as "slow" is itself produced through contrast, functioning as an affective comparison that belongs most strongly to outsiders arriving from major cities rather than existing as an inherent property of the place. In this sense, the utopian imaginary is not simply about Dali. Instead, it is a mechanism for naming what the city has made intolerable and projecting a liveable tempo elsewhere. At the same time, interlocutors repeatedly qualified the popular escape narrative by emphasising that slowing down is not automatically achieved upon arrival. One recurring point was that young visitors with limited savings may initially experience freshness and relief, but as their stay lengthens and their funds begin to run out, anxiety becomes highly concrete and the emotional promise of relaxation easily collapses. Yu similarly expressed scepticism toward the idea that one can simply escape pressure in Dali. She argued that the people most likely to sustain a genuinely slow life are retirees, noting that it is not nearly as easy to slow down as public representations suggest. These ethnographic accounts do not prematurely shift the analysis into questions of local infrastructure. Rather, they sharpen the archaeological point by demonstrating that the utopian promise functions as a pressure-release fantasy precisely because the desired condition of liveable time depends on socioeconomic circumstances that many outsiders do not actually possess.

This dynamic justifies a move toward broader interpretation without reducing the text to mere proof of an existing theory. Under conditions of intensified competition, what is being desired is not a grand utopia of collective abundance, but a micro-utopia of personal time and affective stability, specifically an everyday rhythm that does not require constant self-justification. Dali therefore appears less as a conventional tourist destination than as a socially situated imaginary, serving as a placeholder for a liveable tempo and a morally legitimate way of being. Within the archaeological mode, Dali functions less as a factual description of reality than as a critical instrument for evaluating the present. Following Levitas's account of utopia-as-archaeology as an exercise in identifying "silences" and interpolating what is "missing" or left as "blank

spaces” in images of the good society (Levitas, 2013, p. 154), the thread can be read as making legible what urban life is experienced to lack. In this corpus, the missing elements are repeatedly framed as uninterrupted time, psychological autonomy, and an everyday rhythm that does not feel permanently audited.

Ontological mode: constructing an alternative moral order and a liveable subject

In Levitas’s (2013, p. 177) framework, the ontological mode asks what kinds of subjects and forms of human flourishing become thinkable within an alternative vision of society. Applying this mode, this chapter examines how the Dali utopia actively re-specifies what counts as a legitimate person. By interweaving platform representations with ethnographic fieldwork, the analysis reveals a deeply stratified reality. While the digital imaginary successfully constructs a therapeutic subject who is permitted to be vulnerable and free from metric optimisation, ethnographic accounts demonstrate that this ontological freedom is highly exclusionary. The core findings indicate that the platformed liberation of the urban sojourner is structurally underwritten by prior capital accumulation, and it is frequently achieved by instrumentalising local ethnic minorities as static, commodified backdrops.

To unpack how this bifurcated ontology operates, the analysis proceeds through four thematic dimensions. First, it explores how the platform decentres the optimised urban self into a receptive organism, contrasting this digital fantasy with the strict bodily discipline imposed on local service workers. Second, it examines the legitimisation of vulnerability and uncertainty, using field accounts to demonstrate that safely inhabiting such fragility requires robust economic safety nets. Third, the discussion turns to the reconstruction of the tourist as an ethical observer, highlighting the algorithmic conformity that ultimately structures this seemingly authentic attention. Finally, the analysis investigates the identity politics of the utopian space, revealing how local Gen Z youth actively negotiate and resist the commodified ethnic stereotypes imposed upon them by the tourist gaze.

De-centering the optimised self: from project to receptive organism

The ontological work of these threads is not simply to describe Dali, but to actively re-specify what counts as a legitimate person. In Levitas's terms, the ontological mode of utopia asks what kinds of subjects and forms of human flourishing become thinkable under alternative social arrangements (Levitas, 2013, p. 177). Across the Rednote corpus, Dali is constructed as an ethical arena in which the dominant urban subject, typically audited, measurable, and permanently oriented toward optimisation, is displaced by a subject who is finally authorised to simply live. This shift is achieved through a coordinated assemblage of image, caption, rhythm, and bodily stance. Together, these elements function as micro-technologies of utopification. They act as repeatable scripts that educate desire and re-train perception toward new possibilities of life (Levitas, 2013, pp. 14-15).

Thread 2 stages this ontological rupture through a visual pedagogy of de-centering. The sequence opens in a quiet forest where a solitary figure looks upward, dwarfed by vertical trunks and filtered light. By minimising facial detail and rendering the human body secondary to the environment, the camera visually rehearses a subject who is no longer the center of a self-monitoring project. The post immediately translates this visual withdrawal into an explicit ethical instruction:

Forget your status, KPIs, age, and body fat percentage. Here, you can leave all of those metrics behind and just be a living human. (Thread 2)

Read through Levitas's (2013, p. 154) framework, this list functions as a reverse audit. It names the evaluative coordinates that govern the urban present only to refuse them, thereby making visible the blank spaces in dominant images of the good life. The ideal subject is no longer the one who is highly legible to corporate metrics, but the one who can successfully stop being legible and still retain moral worth.

However, ethnographic fieldwork fundamentally complicates this ontological withdrawal by revealing who is actually permitted to step outside the evaluative regime. While the digital sojourner temporarily sheds the burden of KPIs and optimization,

local youth working within Dali's service economy remain tightly bound to alternative regimes of bodily and temporal discipline. Zhang's experience in an internet-famous café starkly illustrates this disparity:

I cannot use my phone from the moment I start work until the moment I finish. I have to remain standing for long periods to manage the entire floor, and my meal break is strictly limited to only twenty minutes. (Zhang, 22, local Bai café waitress)

While tourists perform a metric-free existence in the foreground, Zhang's subjectivity is reduced to a highly disciplined function of the service environment. Her bodily disposition is continuously evaluated to maintain the photogenic calm consumed by others. The ability to exist simply as a "living human" without having to constantly justify one's presence is therefore not a universal ontological shift generated by the local geography. Rather, it is a highly uneven privilege subsidised by the unseen discipline of others.

Returning to the digital corpus, Thread 3 extends the ontological re-specification of the tourist by transmuting the self from a project of continuous improvement into a receptive organism. Juxtaposed against images of expansive water and soft seasonal light, the narrator actively redraws the boundaries of human agency:

I just want to be a plant growing in Dali, merely absorbing sunlight, air, and water. Dali can accept everything about me and subsequently replenish my energy. (Thread 3)

This metaphor is profoundly significant. Here, Harvey's (2000) insistence that utopias are processual rather than static becomes visible. Ontologically, this asserts that legitimacy is not earned but granted through relational containment. Flourishing is no longer framed as a status competition, but as the lived practice of being allowed to absorb.

Thread 7 pushes this logic to an ontological minimum, establishing a baseline where mere presence is legitimised as sufficient. Visually, humans are repeatedly positioned as minuscule figures against vast expanses of sea and sky. The textual anchor strips human action down to its most ordinary components, boldly claiming value simply in

walking, observing, breathing, and living. By moralising the basic acts of breathing and walking, the post constructs a direct counter-script to the urban demand that existence must always be justified by productive doing. These grounded routines function as what Toulmin (1992, p. 203) terms "futureables." Rather than offering abstract policy solutions, the thread provides an imaginative orientation toward a different life that can be actively rehearsed in the present.

Yet, field accounts reveal a sharp contrast between this digital fantasy of an untethered, minimalist self and the deeply embedded subjectivities of local residents. For local interlocutors, flourishing is rarely articulated as a desire to become a passive plant or a detached observer. Chuan's identity and sense of purpose, for example, are inextricably woven into his responsibilities as a father, a builder, and a member of the local mountain rescue team. His existence is defined by active community embeddedness rather than a withdrawal from obligation. Similarly, Yu's sense of self is deeply rooted in local hospitality, matrilineal care work, and anxieties regarding Bai cultural transmission. For these local actors, a meaningful life is not achieved by stripping away social roles to reach an "ontological minimum," but by maintaining complex webs of kinship, labour, and local belonging.

To treat these ontological scripts merely as aesthetic travel diaries would therefore miss their critical edge and their inherent contradictions. Drawing on Harding's (1991, p. 161) notion of strong objectivity, which conceptualises the value of putting the subject of knowledge on the same critical plane as the object of inquiry, this interwoven analysis illuminates a profound tension. Narrated from the perspective of an exhausted urban subject, the Rednote threads construct a compelling alternative moral order. They redefine the person from an optimised project to a receptive organism, powerfully diagnosing what forms of life are rendered unliveable under urban metric governance. Yet, as the ethnographic reality demonstrates, the capacity to inhabit this minimalist, decoupled subjectivity is highly conditional. The utopification of Dali successfully makes a non-instrumental subject thinkable for the urban sojourner, but it achieves this by systematically obscuring the highly relational, obligated, and heavily disciplined

subjectivities of the local residents who form the living infrastructure of the destination.

Legitimising vulnerability and uncertainty: the non-naïve utopian subject

If the first ontological move in these threads is to de-center the self from metric optimisation, the second move is to re-authorise what counts as a legitimate subject, specifically a self who is depleted, uncertain, and unfinished. In Levitas's terms, the ontological mode asks what kinds of persons are made thinkable and livable under an alternative arrangement of the good society (Levitas, 2013, p. 175). Here, the Dali utopia does not simply oppose KPI-logic. It rewrites the moral conditions under which one is allowed to exist. Rather than staging a triumphant escape narrative, these posts construct a non-naïve utopian subject whose fragility is not treated as an embarrassing remainder, but rather as a foundational part of the lifeworld's ethical design.

Thread 5 frames departure not as leisure but as a necessity that follows an embodied diagnostic. The narrator describes a low point and an invisible low pressure that has enveloped their existence. This opening matters because it shifts the subject position from a responsible optimiser to a legitimate patient in need of repair. In the urban achievement society, fatigue is moralised through the positivity of "Can," ensuring that the subject internalises exhaustion as a personal inadequacy (Han, 2015, p. 8). Thread 5 counters this moralisation by treating depletion as a valid starting point and an ontological baseline rather than a failure state. In other words, the good life is no longer narrated as the ultimate reward for self-discipline, but as the necessary condition that makes continuing life possible.

This repair-logic is intensified visually through the motif of purposeful idleness. The narrator sits in a daze before the vast Cangshan mountains, while a laptop, the condensed symbol of urban productivity, appears physically present yet effectively deactivated and dwarfed by the scale of the landscape. The image performs an ontological reordering. The device associated with deadlines and output is displaced from center-stage, while the body's capacity to simply rest becomes the privileged

activity. The post thus re-signifies idleness from a source of guilt into a necessary practice of re-inhabiting the self. When the narrator states that their eyes are filled by the beautiful scenery and that the emptiness in their heart seems to be filled as well, the metaphor transcends lyricism. It implies a different model of personhood in which the self is a container that can be depleted and replenished, thereby deserving care rather than judgement. This constitutes ontological work in Levitas's (2013, p. 177) sense. The lifeworld imagines not only a different place, but a different kind of human flourishing and a different threshold for what counts as a life worth living.

Thread 8 extends this ontological reconstruction from exhaustion to uncertainty. Textually, the narrator names structural anxiety directly while actively rewriting the rules of what constitutes a valid life choice:

Faced with the instability of income and the desperate desire for an exact way out, I realised that sojourning does not necessarily require full preparation. I just want to hit the road and seek direction while walking. (Thread 8)

The post refuses the fantasy of a total cure. Instead, insecurity is acknowledged and accommodated so that action remains possible without guarantees (Giddens, 1990, pp. 154-155). In a context where educated aspirants are pushed into intensified competition for a fixed set of high-status positions, anxiety about being 'on track' becomes structurally amplified (Turchin, 2023). Against this background, Thread 8 articulates a different ontological script. Movement is reframed as a legitimate way of knowing, and incompleteness is presented as an acceptable state of being rather than a personal failure.

However, ethnographic fieldwork critically complicates this ontological posture by revealing the hidden material conditions required to safely embrace such vulnerability. The digital assertion that one can live without guarantees is sharply contrasted by the grounded realities of local residents. Tao, a local youth who experienced significant business failures and debts, maintains a noticeably relaxed disposition toward the future. His capacity to remain untroubled is structurally underwritten by inherited housing assets:

A relatively common situation in Dali is that, if the older generation was smart, the family would usually have two houses: one to live in and one to rent out. (Tao, 30, local Bai mahjong parlour owner)

Tao can afford to live seemingly without guarantees precisely because his life is deeply guaranteed by pre-existing capital. Similarly, Yang and Yu observed that when urban sojourners attempt to embrace unreadiness without sufficient financial buffers, their ontological freedom quickly collapses. Once savings are depleted, the romantic ambiguity of "seeking direction while walking" transforms into acute anxiety regarding rent and survival.

What makes these Rednote threads analytically significant is that they successfully convert private vulnerability into a socially shareable norm of personhood, even if this norm is materially precarious offline. In Taylor's (2004, p. 23) terms, the posts operate at the level of the social imaginary, cultivating an unspoken sense of how life ought to be lived through embodied narrative and visual cues. By repeatedly normalising a self who is depleted or uncertain, and by providing images of how that self can be held by mountains and dusk light, the platform accommodates the fragile subject. Furthermore, because these are platformed texts, this imaginary is modular and easily replicable within algorithmic vernaculars (Bucher and Helmond, 2018, p. 241; van Dijck, 2013, p. 23). Ultimately, the ontological project across these threads is doubly non-naïve. It neither promises a life without anxiety nor treats fragility as failure. Instead, it successfully makes a vulnerable, unoptimised, and unresolved subject fully intelligible as a legitimate person online, while fieldwork serves as a vital reminder that safely inhabiting this fragility offline remains a deeply stratified privilege.

The ethical observer and collective resonance: scaling the utopian subject

If the preceding ontological moves de-center the self from metric optimisation and authorise its vulnerability, the next operation in these threads is to reconstruct the urban sojourner as an ethical observer who belongs to a shared generational narrative. The

utopian self is not merely a passive recipient of Dali's healing. Rather, it is a subject who actively reclaims attention as a moral practice, transforming private exhaustion into a collective project.

In the contemporary urban landscape, attention is heavily instrumentalised, fragmented by digital demands, and tethered to productivity. In the Rednote corpus, however, attention is ontologically re-specified as a method of returning to authenticity. In Thread 2, the visual field narrows to a pair of hands holding an open book near the lakeshore, with sunlight glinting off the pages. The body is present only in fragments, such as hands and hair, thereby emphasising deep absorption rather than the mere performance of leisure. The accompanying text claims that reading *Walden* in the woods led to a sudden understanding of the authenticity of life. Here, Levitas's ontological mode pushes beyond mere descriptive categories. As she insists, utopia necessarily involves claims about who we are and who we might and should be (Levitas, 2013, p. 196). This scene proposes that the ideal subject is one capable of deep, non-instrumental focus. By engaging in slow attention, the subject actively distinguishes better from worse experiences (Levitas, 2013, p. 180), proving to themselves that they can still access human flourishing outside the city's distracted productivity. Similarly, in Thread 7, the subject's gaze is directed outward toward ordinary, non-spectacular occurrences, such as catching a glimpse of irrigation workers in green wheat fields or noticing two figures holding hands far away. By capturing these fragile moments of gentleness, the post frames the utopian subject as an ethical observer.

However, ethnographic fieldwork problematises this portrayal of unmediated, authentic observation. This contradiction is vividly captured on the outskirts of Dali, where the peaceful green wheat field celebrated online as a site of solitary reflection is actually transformed into a congested stage, with crowds of tourists waiting in line to perform identical poses for their cameras (see Figure 1). Yang, a local guesthouse manager, noted that the platformed aesthetic of small happiness is ironically generated through highly homogenised and algorithmically repetitive scripts. He observed that the moments of deep reflection celebrated online often rely on identical visual angles,

uniform filters, and similar background music, ultimately producing a curated display space rather than an authentic encounter. For Yang, genuine beauty arises unexpectedly in unforced daily life, standing in sharp contrast to the staged tableaux cultivated for digital circulation. Consequently, the capacity for deep attention celebrated online is not a complete escape from systemic logic. Rather, it is profoundly structured by the algorithmic affordances and visual conventions of the platform.



Figure 1: A local wheat field utilised simultaneously as agricultural land and a tourist photographic site. Visitors can be seen positioning themselves within the landscape for staged images, transforming an ordinary rural space into a consumable visual backdrop.

Despite these local frictions, this newly constructed subject does not remain isolated in the digital realm. As the narrative progresses in Thread 7, the individual practice of

breathing and observing expands into a sweeping, declarative social script, claiming that fleeing to Dali has become the midnight self-rescue slogan for countless distressed people. This is a profound ontological leap. The subject is no longer framed as a solitary deviant dropping out of the rat race, but is instead recognised as part of a legitimate collective of exhausted urbanites. The post reframes individual withdrawal as a collectively intelligible form of social dreaming, in which shared anxieties and alternative life-images are articulated as a common horizon rather than a private fantasy (Sargent, 1994, p. 3). The individual's vulnerability is thus scaled up into a generational diagnosis. In Taylor's (2004, p. 25) terms, such articulation works at the level of the social imaginary as a wider background understanding through which common practices become intelligible. Relocating to Dali is thereby legitimised not as a failure to compete, but as a collectively intelligible response to structural suffocation.

This collective resonance is ultimately solidified by assigning legible social categories to the new subject. In Thread 8, the post is heavily anchored by platform identity labels and tags, prominently featuring terms like "digital nomad," "sojourning," and "freelancer." By categorising the narrative, Thread 8 frames the author's story not as a unique epiphany, but as a replicable pathway. These tags provide a ready-made vocabulary for users to envisage alternative futures under conditions of high uncertainty (Giddens, 1990, p. 154). Instead of passively consuming Dali as a scenic backdrop, the platform users who adopt these tags are attempting to act as conscious architects of their fates (Harvey, 2000, p. 237). Through this ontological move, the Rednote threads successfully construct a complete alternative subject. Yet, this shared identity reveals an ultimate paradox. The utopian subject seeks to escape the quantifying gaze of the city, only to voluntarily adopt the algorithmic tags and homogenised visual aesthetics required to make their flourishing socially visible on the platform.

The bifurcated subject: negotiating local minority identity

While the platform constructs a compelling alternative identity for the urban sojourner, placing these platformed claims in dialogue with ethnographic fieldwork exposes a

profound blind spot in this ontological reconstruction. To perform the role of the ethical observer and to consume the authenticity of the local environment, the urban sojourner structurally requires a static, picturesque "Other" to observe. As Salazar (2012, pp. 865-866) argues in his study of tourism imaginaries, dominant mobile subjects frequently fix local populations into essentialised, traditional representations to serve their own quest for authenticity. Ethnographic encounters with local Bai youth reveal that the utopification of Dali relies precisely on this bifurcated ontology. The platform grants complex, reflective, and transformative subjectivities to urban migrants through identity labels like digital nomads, while simultaneously exerting intense identity pressure on local ethnic minorities to remain as simple, hospitable, and culturally commodified backdrops.

This tension between platformed ethnic stereotypes and lived local subjectivity was acutely felt by Yu. She observed that the gaze of the digital sojourner frequently captures only the most easily commodified surface elements, such as tie-dye crafts or traditional roof ornaments. This process perfectly illustrates Cohen's (1988, p. 380) classic conceptualisation of cultural commoditization, wherein deep cultural meanings are stripped away to cater to external expectations. As Yang (2011, p. 574) notes, minority hosts face immense structural pressure to perform "staged traditionalism." However, while platforms circulate joyful images of ethnic authenticity, Yu's actual ontological concerns center on profound cultural anxiety:

My child can no longer speak the Bai language. Because we speak Mandarin more often with outsiders here, some of our language has become a bit Sinicized. So I feel that our Bai culture really needs to be protected and passed down. (Yu, 28, local Bai landlady)

The platformed utopian narrative systematically ignores these deep intergenerational anxieties, replacing the complex subjectivity of local cultural transmitters with easily consumable ethnic symbols.

The ethnographic material further demonstrates that local Gen Z youth actively negotiate and hybridise these imposed identity categories. Chio (2011, pp. 556-557)

observes that ethnic minorities in rural China are rarely frozen in traditionalism; rather, they actively navigate tourism-driven modernity to craft hybrid subjectivities. Chuan treats his ethnic and local identity not as a strategic resource to be asserted for tourists, but rather as a taken-for-granted condition of his life:

For me, I wouldn't actively use the labels of 'local' or 'ethnic minority.' But I don't resist them either. This is something that inherently belongs to me, so what is there to resist?
(Chuan, 30, local Bai guesthouse owner)

For local actors like Chuan, human flourishing is not achieved by playing the role of the pure local host in a digital utopia. Their identities are inextricably bound up with pragmatic economic survival and an acute awareness of the limits of the tourism economy.

This brings a critical dimension to Levitas's ontological mode. As Levitas (2013, p. 196) insists, utopia necessarily involves claims about who we are and who we should be. The Rednote threads successfully construct a legitimate alternative subject for the exhausted urbanite, offering them legible platform identities and the moral high ground of ethical observation. Yet, the ethnographic reality cautions that this digital flourishing often functions extractively. The utopian subject is scaled up and validated through algorithms, but this visibility is frequently achieved by instrumentalising local minority youth. By documenting how local residents refuse to be flattened into mere ethnic props, the fieldwork ensures that the ontological analysis of Dali does not merely celebrate the liberation of the urban tourist. Instead, it critically illuminates the uneven distribution of subjective complexity, highlighting how local youth actively reclaim their own multifaceted identities within a highly platformised spatial economy.

Synthesis: the stratified ontology of the utopian subject

Taken together, this chapter demonstrates how the utopification of Dali operates ontologically by constructing a therapeutic alternative to the urban achievement society. Across the platform corpus, the dominant urban subject is systematically de-centered and replaced by a self who is permitted to be depleted, unfinished, and organically

receptive. The digital narrative re-authorises vulnerability as a legitimate starting point for living, transforming private exhaustion into a shared generational script through the use of platform tags and aestheticised observation. In this digital imaginary, human flourishing is no longer defined by metric optimisation or relentless productivity. Instead, it is defined by the capacity to reclaim deep attention and to inhabit uncertainty without the burden of constant self-justification.

However, integrating ethnographic fieldwork into this ontological analysis reveals the severe structural boundaries and the exclusionary nature of this new subjectivity. The field accounts clearly demonstrate that safely embracing uncertainty and stepping outside evaluative regimes are not magical effects generated by the local landscape. Rather, these are highly conditional privileges heavily underwritten by prior capital accumulation, familial support, and economic buffers. Furthermore, the platformed liberation of the urban sojourner relies on a bifurcated ontology that routinely instrumentalises local Bai youth. To sustain the romantic fantasy of the ethical observer, the digital imaginary attempts to flatten local residents into static, commodified ethnic backdrops. Yet, local youth actively resist this touristic ethnicity, asserting complex, hybrid identities that prioritise familial obligation and economic survival over the passive performance of staged traditionalism.

Ultimately, this interwoven analysis refines the application of Levitas's ontological mode. It confirms that the Dali utopia successfully articulates a compelling vision of who exhausted urbanites might and should become (Levitas, 2013, p. 196). At the same time, it exposes the extractive mechanisms required to sustain this digital vision. The utopian subjectivity celebrated online is neither universal nor innocent. It is a highly stratified social achievement that distributes ontological freedom to the mobile consumer while displacing the burden of cultural performance and material maintenance onto local residents. Therefore, evaluating the Dali utopia requires looking beyond the therapeutic relief it offers to the urban migrant. It demands a critical recognition of the local actors who continuously negotiate, sustain, and resist the identities imposed upon them by this platformed spatial economy.

Architectural mode: rendering the utopia calculable, buildable, and repeatable

If the archaeological mode diagnosed the urban deficit and the ontological mode reconstructed a liveable subject, Levitas's (2013, p. 197) architectural mode asks how an alternative lifeworld is materially organised and practically sustained. Across the Rednote corpus, Dali is progressively modularised into a replicable life-script, shifting from emotional relief to concrete operating conditions. However, by interweaving platform analysis with offline ethnographic fieldwork, this chapter uncovers a central architectural tension. The findings reveal that the seemingly accessible and effortless utopia celebrated online is heavily scaffolded by uneven capital accumulation, strict aesthetic discipline, and the invisible maintenance labour of local residents. The platformed promise of an alternative life consistently obscures the deep financial and material prerequisites required to reproduce it day after day.

To unpack how this utopian blueprint operates and breaks down in practice, the analysis proceeds through four infrastructural dimensions. First, it examines how costed budgets render the alternative life calculable, contrasting this digital accessibility with local realities of inflation and financial anxiety. Second, it explores the translation of aspiration into buildable property, highlighting the hidden offline burdens of debt and spatial policy constraints. Third, the analysis addresses the repeatable rhythms of tender service labour, exposing the rigorous bodily discipline required to keep tourist spaces photogenic. Finally, it investigates how self-tracking metrics are reclaimed to archive a liveable rhythm, demonstrating that such recontextualisation remains a fragile privilege bound to time autonomy.

Costed budgets: rendering the alternative life calculable

The architectural translation of desire begins with calculation. Thread 9 largely bypasses panoramic landscape spectacle and opens instead inside a retro café interior—warm yellow bulbs, exposed wooden beams, dense green plants, and low leather sofas. This framing matters because it establishes “slow life” as a space that can be inhabited,

not merely imagined: the good life appears tactile, indoor, and lived-in rather than distant and sublime. Over this atmosphere, however, the post overlays its most consequential device: a spreadsheet-like monthly budget that itemises what it takes to “stay” rather than to “visit.” In Levitas’s architectural mode, utopia is not only an affective longing but a “practical imagination of arrangements” that specifies how living differently becomes feasible (Levitas, 2013, p. 197). Thread 9 performs exactly this conversion: it turns yearning into an operational plan.

The budget breaks the month into modules—rent stratified by micro-locations (ancient town versus Caicun or Longkan), transport via an electric scooter, groceries and daily necessities, but also socially normalised categories such as café check-ins and cultural markets. This modularisation does more than inform; it reorganises the utopia into a risk-managed taxonomy of living. Instead of presenting Dali as an ineffable refuge, the post offers thresholds—“minimum to get by,” “recommended range for better experience,” and an “upper range”—so that the alternative life becomes a decision that can be budgeted, adjusted, and executed. The utopia is therefore made reachable not by insisting it is true, but by presenting it as technically manageable. Put differently, the fantasy is stabilised by being rendered into a “futureable”: a practical horizon that can be approached through ordinary, incremental decisions rather than a heroic rupture (Toulmin, 1992, p. 203).

At the same time, the very categories through which Thread 9 makes Dali “calculable” quietly define what kind of everydayness counts. By treating café culture, market browsing, and aestheticised leisure as ordinary components of the monthly plan, the budget normalises a lifestyle in which “slow life” remains tethered to platform-legible signs of taste. This is where platform infrastructures matter: the post does not only describe a private plan but offers a template designed to circulate, consistent with the broader claim that platforms have become “central forces in the construction of sociality” (van Dijck, 2013, p. 23). It aligns with scholarship on Rednote’s aspirational economy, where “ordinary” lifestyle posts are shaped by algorithmic incentives that formalise what appears spontaneous (Guo, 2022, p. 314; Yi and Xian, 2024, p. 20).

Calculation functions here as a cultural technique: it makes the good life legible and shareable by compressing it into reproducible modules, enabling others to copy the script.

However, the ethnographic reality complicates this seamless calculability. While the digital template frames sojourning as economically light and technically manageable, local interlocutors explicitly challenged the platformed imaginary of a “cheap Dali.” Yang highlighted the demographic reality regarding who can actually afford to sustain this calculable utopia:

Consumption in Dali is not low. Many people who come to live here are from big cities and have high demands for quality of life, which drives up local prices. The hardest part of living in Dali is that income and expenditure are completely disproportionate. (Yang, 25, local Bai guesthouse manager)

For university students or young people arriving with limited savings, the utopian promise quickly gives way to concrete financial anxiety once their initial budget runs out. Yu corroborated this structural limitation by pointing out that finding stable and adequately paying local employment to sustain the platformed lifestyle is unfeasible for most young sojourners:

The people who can truly and most easily live a slow life here are actually retired elderly people. For young people without savings, Dali is not a place to escape pressure. It is merely exchanging one kind of pressure for another. (Yu, 28, local Bai landlady)

What emerges here is not simply a factual correction indicating that “Dali is not cheap,” but a profound architectural tension. Benson and O’Reilly (2009, pp. 618-619) show that lifestyle migration in search of a “better way of life” is enabled by relative economic privilege and uneven access to resources, such that some movers can lower everyday costs through property ownership while others must consolidate limited resources or rely on renting and more precarious arrangements. The budget posts work by making the utopia calculable and therefore approachable. Yet, fieldwork reveals that this calculability is highly unstable because the costs of the good life are not fixed numbers; they are moving targets shaped by platform-driven demand, seasonal tourism

rhythms, and the normalisation of aesthetic consumption. In this sense, the “monthly expenses” template does not merely report costs; it can also participate in producing the very desirability that pushes those costs upward. Consequently, while “slow life” can be priced and planned online, the offline reality dictates that this lifestyle remains an uneven privilege. It is accessible primarily to those who possess a pre-existing economic buffer, such as prior capital accumulation or retirement security, to absorb a constantly inflating utopia.

Buildable property: translating aspiration into spatial production

Thread 10 pushes Levitas’s architectural mode to its most literal register by shifting the Dali-utopia from a temporary arrangement of consumption to a durable project of spatial production. The post positions aspiration directly within capital and entrepreneurship rather than pure retreat:

After graduating college, I spent over a million yuan to own three courtyards in Dali. We deliberately removed the reception desk so that checking in feels like coming home. Even a vacant room is just a legitimate holiday for oneself. (Thread 10)

This move aligns with accounts of lifestyle migration in which mobility is frequently realised through lifestyle entrepreneurship in destination spaces (Sun and Xu, 2017, pp. 67-68). The visual sequence refuses effortless pastoral beauty. Bright selfies are sharply juxtaposed with construction scenes of bricks, waste materials, work gloves, and bare concrete. The utopia is not discovered as a ready-made refuge. It is assembled through dust, fatigue, and a visible before-and-after logic that turns renovation into proof. The promise of slowness is stabilised not by scenery alone but by showing the work required to materialise an alternative lifeworld, echoing the imperative to act as “conscious architects of our fates” (Harvey, 2000, p. 237).

At the same time, the thread makes buildability inseparable from platformed entrepreneurial strategy. The expansion into a “third courtyard” is framed as a decision informed by digital “traffic” and scaling advice from college friends, suggesting that space is treated primarily as an operational node within an attention economy. The

post's managerial realism—vacancy anxiety, seasonal uncertainty, and the need to keep rooms visually appealing—sits alongside affective labour aimed at preserving the utopian aura. “Vacant rooms” are reframed as a legitimate “holiday for oneself,” and the commercial operation is carefully re-coded as intimacy by removing the reception desk so that checking in “feels like coming home” (Thread 10). What is being built, therefore, is not only rooms but a curated moral-aesthetic experience. It is a commercial arrangement that must continuously downplay its commerciality to remain legible as an authentic “life.” This fusion of business maintenance with lifestyle performance is characteristic of aspirational labour on Rednote, where entrepreneurial work is platformised and made narratable through an aesthetic of unhurried living (Guo, 2022, p. 314).

Zhu's (2018, pp. 82-83) conceptualisation of staged authenticity clarifies how this home-like promise is practically produced. The removal of the reception desk, the emphasis on “coming home,” and the presentation of calm interiors operate as a cue structure that allows intimacy and simplicity to be consumed as authenticity. This is a form of customisation in which settings are tailored toward an external public, ensuring that the experience of “the real” is accessed through carefully managed signals rather than through transparent access to everyday life. In Thread 10, the architectural blueprint is therefore double: it materialises a hospitality business while simultaneously designing the conditions under which that business can be perceived as anti-commercial, sincere, and utopian.

Fieldwork thickens this buildability narrative by rendering the local conditions of spatial production visible. Chuan's account sharply illustrates how property-based livelihood strategies sit alongside heavy offline obligations. Building a guesthouse involves navigating intense financial realities that are entirely absent from the romanticized digital blueprints:

If I just talk about myself, the main pressure comes from my family and my finances. I did not have enough money to build this guesthouse, so I took out loans, and now I am in debt. (Chuan, 30, local Bai guesthouse owner)

Furthermore, the architectural capacity to build is heavily regulated by local environmental governance. Platform narratives often treat the landscape as an open canvas, but Chuan highlighted the severe restrictions placed upon local spatial production:

Regarding Erhai Lake protection, the policy has drawn three strict red lines for house construction. If you want to rebuild or construct a house, you simply cannot get approval. You are forced to rent and live elsewhere. (Chuan, 30, local Bai guesthouse owner)

Read alongside the platform narrative, these field accounts clarify a broader spatial implication: as Dali becomes buildable and ownable through circulating entrepreneurial scripts, the utopian imaginary fundamentally reconfigures local spatial value. The thread's emphasis on expansion, "traffic," and scalable courtyards points toward a place-branding dynamic in which aestheticised "quality of place" becomes an economic lever. This dynamic directly reconfigures the physical facades of the local economy. As shown in Figure 2, local storefronts are heavily decorated with straw hats and floral arrangements purely to conform to the dominant visual aesthetics of lifestyle platforms, effectively turning the physical shop into an interactive stage designed to capture online traffic and encourage tourist photography. As Florida (2014, pp. 201-202) warns, this often generates uneven effects, such as rising rents and the possibility that different groups inhabit proximity without meaningful mixing, effectively "occupying separate universes." Ultimately, the architectural mode reveals buildability not as a purely individual achievement but as a socially organised process. It relies on inherited assets, financial leverage, and platform visibility economies that make some lives appear effortless while concealing the deeply unequal material infrastructures beneath.



Figure 2: A decorated storefront in Dali Old Town explicitly designed for visual appeal. The dense arrangement of props and warm tones reflects how local physical spaces are modified to align with popular platform aesthetics.

Repeatable rhythms: tender labour, reciprocity, and the labour of being “photogenic”

If Thread 10 makes the utopia buildable, Threads 11 and 12 show how it is kept running through repeatable rhythms of work and reciprocity. The coffee shop is staged as a daily infrastructure of sociability, where the value of place lies in micro-encounters. Florida describes “quality of place” as dependent on what is there, who is there, and what is going on, especially the everyday vibrancy of café culture and street life that signals a livable environment rather than a merely scenic one (Florida, 2012, p. 281). Thread 11

visualises this vibrancy through warm tones and the density of objects that imply lingering rather than passing through. It narrates a day of production yet repeatedly converts transactions into relations. In Thread 12, an unexpected “birthday surprise” emerges through small acts of generosity that travel quickly across people: a cake appears, congratulations are enacted, gifts circulate, and the day concludes with a collective clean-up and a shared late-night meal. The utopia here is sustained by low-threshold reciprocity: help arrives quickly, gratitude is voiced often, and belonging is performed through minor but repeatable rituals. The café becomes an everyday site of intentionality, a space where shared values of mutual care are enacted through recurring micro-practices rather than one-off emotional peaks (Sargent, 1994, p. 16).

Yet, fieldwork complicates the softness of this scene by making the material conditions behind this “photogenic everydayness” visible. Zhang, a service worker in a highly popular “internet-famous” café, described a rhythm closer to discipline than leisure: nine-hour shifts on her feet, hurried meals, and frequent overtime, while customers queued primarily to take photos and reproduce the same angles circulating online. In her account, the café’s calm depends on what Warhurst and Nickson (2007, p. 105) describe as aesthetic labour, where employees become part of the service “product” and employers seek to shape the service encounter by recruiting the “right” attitudes and paying close attention to appearance. The result is a split organisation of space and experience. Drawing on MacCannell’s (1973, pp. 591-592) discussion of staged settings and “back regions,” the front-facing performance of “slow life” is sustained by a less visible backstage of compressed time, physical fatigue, and repetitive cleaning work that keeps the atmosphere stable. This stark segregation of space and physical effort is visually manifest in popular establishments where visitors queue to capture the idealised leisure on display (see Figure 3).



Figure 3: An "internet-famous" café in Dali where visitors queue and occupy space primarily for photography. The scene captures the contrast between the highly curated, "relaxed" foreground and the high foot traffic that requires constant background maintenance.

A similar tension is articulated by Yang, who works at a guesthouse front desk while also taking on travel-planning work. Yang emphasised that what appears “relaxed” from the outside can be structurally time-binding: long hours of availability, fragmented personal time, and a form of immobility disguised as freedom. His description matters because it reframes the very “repeatability” celebrated in Threads 11 and 12. Routine does not only mean gentle cycles of reciprocity; it also means strict staffing schedules, constant readiness, and the continuous “emotional labor” required to suppress personal fatigue and manage expressions to foster a welcoming environment for tourists

(Wharton, 2009, p. 149). The café's reciprocal warmth, in other words, is not automatically generated by the place itself—it is maintained through a strenuous combination of affective performance and informal mutual support.

Yu added another crucial layer to this social architecture by pointing to the forms of public maintenance that make the tourist-utopian scene possible but remain utterly unacknowledged online:

Dali is extremely windy, and the hardest working people are the sanitation workers. Because there is so much rubbish, they have to wake up at 4 a.m. and clear it by 7 a.m. Most of them are locals earning only 2,500 yuan a month, with no meals, no accommodation, long hours, exposure to the weather, and no holidays. (Yu, 28, local Bai landlady)

Hatton (2017, p. 338) conceptualises this as the mechanism of "invisible work" in precarious environments, where the labour crucial to the functioning of a system is structurally obscured to maintain the pristine image of the consumer experience. This offline reality does not negate the tenderness staged in Threads 11 and 12. Instead, it clarifies its material preconditions. The circulation of happiness that appears so effortless on Rednote is materially scaffolded by uneven labour burdens. Returning to Levitas's (2013, p. 198) architectural mode of utopia, this intersection of platform representation and ethnographic reality directs our attention to how utopian atmospheres are practically organised. It reveals that the "good life" is not merely imagined online; it is reproduced day after day through concrete opening hours, labour schedules, cleaning routines, and the micro-politics of visibility.

Reclaiming metrics: self-tracking as communicative archiving

A small but revealing detail at the end of Thread 12 crystallises the architectural question of sustainability. After a day narrated through relational work, such as making drinks, exchanging gifts, collective clean-ups, and a shared late-night meal, the post closes not on another photogenic corner of Dali but on a screenshot of an Apple Watch showing completed activity rings, logged exercise minutes, and tallied step counts. In a conventional urban frame, such interfaces are closely associated with what Han (2015,

p. 8) terms the “achievement society,” where continuous self-monitoring functions as a subtle extension of audit culture and self-exploitation. Metrics under that logic rarely appear as neutral. They are moralised numbers, easily read as empirical evidence of whether one has performed or optimised oneself adequately.

Within the architectural space of the Dali utopia, however, the meaning of measurement is re-scripted. The Apple Watch does not appear as an anxious prompt to do more tomorrow, nor does it serve as a comparison to an external benchmark. It appears as a closing gesture and a compact “proof” that the day counted, although what exactly counts has been redefined by the narrative that precedes it. The day’s value is established through companionship, small kindnesses, and a workable rhythm of living, allowing the numbers to be folded in as a final seal. This is where self-tracking is better understood as a communicative act rather than a pure audit. As Lomborg and Frandsen (2016, p. 1019) argue, technologically mediated self-tracking is “fundamentally communicative,” operating not merely as data collection but as a vital way of constituting the self and sustaining social relations. Read in this light, the Apple Watch screenshot functions as a narrative device. It communicates a liveable rhythm, performs a form of accomplishment grounded in social support, and offers the audience a legible archive of “having lived” rather than “having optimised.”

The placement of the screenshot is therefore structurally significant. It comes after scenes of baking, gift exchange, and working alongside friends. The metrics condense these dispersed moments into a single, platform-recognisable sign of a full day. In the same way that Thread 9 translates longing into a budget blueprint and Thread 10 translates aspiration into spatial production, Thread 12 translates everyday livability into a recognisable, shareable proof. The screenshot performs sustainability by showing that the utopian life-script can absorb modern measurement without being governed by it. Quantification is thus recontextualised as personal archiving and social signalling rather than an imperative to intensify.

Fieldwork, however, helps clarify why this recontextualisation is not automatic and why it depends heavily on the surrounding structural arrangements. When long hours

dominate one's schedule, the metrics of the day are dictated by occupational demands rather than a self-curated utopian rhythm. Yang's daily routine at the guesthouse starkly exposes this lack of time autonomy:

Every day, the first thing I do after waking up is check work messages. I am tied to the front desk, and then I might be working on travel planning from six in the evening all the way until midnight. (Yang, 25, local Bai guesthouse manager)

For local youth like Yang, an incomplete activity ring is not due to a lack of effort, but rather because his labour requires physical stasis and unpredictable overtime. The Apple Watch can function as communicative archiving only when the surrounding lifeworld has been organised well enough for the numbers to signify livability rather than strain.

The screenshot does not simply decorate the utopian story, but marks an architectural achievement claim. It implies that a sustainable alternative is one in which the tools of quantification can be repurposed so that they serve a different moral order. Yet, fieldwork simultaneously cautions that this reclaimed relation to metrics remains a fragile privilege, available only to those whose lived arrangements of work and time have successfully escaped the very audit pressures that the Dali imaginary seeks to leave behind.

Synthesis: the architectural limits of the operational utopia

Taken together, this chapter demonstrates that the architectural work of utopification lies primarily in making an alternative life operational. Across the Rednote corpus, Dali is systematically rendered calculable through cost templates, buildable through property and renovation scripts, repeatable through routinised service and reciprocity, and finally archivable through communicative metrics that seal a day as full and liveable. Rather than remaining an abstract aesthetic desire, the platformed utopia provides users with a concrete, socio-material blueprint. It breaks down the fantasy of slowing down into manageable steps, making the transition to an alternative lifeworld appear both technically feasible and universally accessible.

Yet, the dialogue between platform material and ethnographic fieldwork reveals that this operationalisation is never neutral. The apparent accessibility of the digital blueprint is consistently scaffolded by deep structural inequalities. As local accounts clearly demonstrate, the effortless "slow life" celebrated online is heavily subsidised by uneven capital accumulation, strict aesthetic discipline, and the invisible maintenance labour that ultimately sustains the photogenic calm. Furthermore, even the seemingly reclaimed relationship to daily measurement relies on a foundational degree of time autonomy that many local service workers and residents simply do not possess. By bringing these offline realities to the forefront, the architectural mode exposes the deep frictions that occur when utopian templates are imposed upon a living, working local environment.

In this sense, architectural utopia is best understood not merely as a set of socio-material arrangements that make the good life appear doable, but fundamentally as a distributional question. It asks who can actually inhabit that doability without being consumed by the strenuous labour required to support it. Returning to Levitas's framework, the architectural mode forces an examination of the material prerequisites of the good society (Levitas, 2013). The integration of platform analysis and ethnographic fieldwork ultimately reveals that the Dali utopia is a highly exclusionary achievement. It remains a liveable reality only for those who can afford to purchase its atmosphere, while its maintenance falls heavily upon those who must navigate the demanding realities of a tourist-driven economy.

Conclusions and Reflections

This thesis has argued that the utopian imaginary of Dali is not a simple geographical reality to be empirically verified, but a composite social practice produced across multiple interacting registers. Analysed through an archaeological lens, this utopification is driven by a profound urban crisis of livability, wherein time, autonomy, and affective stability are experienced as increasingly scarce commodities. Ontologically, the desire for escape is reformatted through platformed infrastructures of visibility. Curated images, captions, and algorithmic identity tags function pedagogically to teach what kinds of alternative selves are desirable and morally legitimate, often achieving this by flattening the complex, lived subjectivities of local minority residents. Architecturally, this alternative lifeworld is sustained through highly unequal socio-material conditions. The realisation of the utopian script depends heavily upon differential access to prior economic buffers and the structurally obscured maintenance and service labour that keeps the aesthetic of a slow life operational. Synthesising these three modes, the research demonstrates that utopification is a dynamic practice that simultaneously diagnoses the exhaustion of the urban present, authorises a therapeutic alternative personhood, and drafts practical arrangements for living otherwise. Crucially, however, it systematically brackets the material preconditions and structural inequalities required to actualise those arrangements.

A central contradiction emerges from placing platform narratives into direct dialogue with grounded ethnographic fieldwork, namely the stark contrast between a frictionless digital script and a friction-laden material reality. Online, Dali is repeatedly formatted as a smooth, consumable template. Complex lifeworlds are compressed into legible visual cues, modular budgets, routinised atmospheres, and accessible identity categories, ensuring that spatial escape becomes imaginable as an actionable plan rather than a risky leap. Offline, however, this very same script is encountered as highly contingent and structurally uneven. Living costs consistently exceed the platformed promise of effortless affordability, temporal autonomy remains a stratified privilege, and the photogenic calmness associated with slow living is maintained only through

rigid spatial discipline and exhaustive local labour. The analytical purpose of this comparison is not to declare online depictions empirically false. Rather, it aims to specify what utopification actively achieves as a social practice, illuminating how digital platforms de-frictionalise urban desire while concealing the deeply unequal socioeconomic conditions required to make that desire liveable.

Building on these insights, this thesis makes three interconnected contributions to the fields of utopian and platform studies.

Empirically, the research moves beyond treating Dali merely as a singular destination case study. Instead, it offers a cross-reading paradigm that treats platform depictions and field encounters as mutually illuminating forms of evidence. Reading Rednote threads in dialogue with ethnographic material demonstrates how the popular narrative of escaping urban involution operates as a potent cultural script with tangible social effects. It renders the promise of an alternative life actionable and morally legitimate. However, as Duffy (2017, p. 11) observes, the platformed ideology of "aspirational labor" inherently romanticises and glamorises conditions that are fundamentally precarious, time-intensive, and decidedly unromantic offline. Fieldwork brings into sharp relief the unequal conditions that enable some individuals to inhabit that promise more easily than others. This dual reading reveals that the platformed utopia is not simply a narrative of personal healing, but a profound distributional question. It is deeply shaped by prior economic buffers, time autonomy, and the chronically undervalued service work that maintains the photogenic calmness upon which the utopian aesthetic depends.

Beyond its empirical findings, the thesis theoretically advances utopian studies by contributing a careful extension of Levitas's (2013) *Utopia as Method*. It demonstrates the framework's immense value as a precise analytical protocol for interpreting platformised material. Rather than treating Levitas's approach as a grand framework applicable exclusively to literary fictions or formal political programmes, the analysis applies her three modes as a disciplined method for reading everyday digital traces. As Cooper (2014, p. 2) argues, utopianism is not confined to blueprint planning; it is

actively forged in the mundane, everyday practices of conceptualising alternative lives. By applying the archaeological mode to diagnose present deficits, the ontological mode to reveal authorised forms of personhood, and the architectural mode to expose the concrete arrangements of desire, the thesis proves that utopia-as-method can be robustly adapted to contemporary digital contexts. It maintains its critical diagnostic force while generating fine-grained insights into how social imaginaries are produced, stabilised, and contested through algorithmic categories and infrastructures of visibility.

Finally, in methodological terms, the thesis demonstrates an ethnographic writing strategy that takes digital and material entanglement seriously. It systematically avoids the reductive binary wherein online content is dismissed as artificial representation and offline fieldwork is romanticised as the sole site of truth. Aligning with the methodological principle that digital media and physical environments are mutually constitutive rather than separate spheres (Pink et al., 2015, p. 7), the study illustrates how algorithmic formatting, genre conventions, and tagging practices belong to the exact same utopian process as the spatial routines and labour negotiations encountered offline in Dali. By treating online circulation and offline inhabitation as one continuous field of practice, the thesis successfully traces how utopian scripts travel, how they become legible as viable life options, and how their inherent frictions surface the moment a frictionless digital template encounters grounded socioeconomic conditions.

The broader implication of this thesis is that the surging popularity of the Dali utopia signals a profound crisis of livability among younger generations navigating systemic hyper-competition, involution, and strict metric governance. What circulates on the digital platform is not simply a picturesque destination image, but a culturally sanctioned coping mechanism. Within this narrative, severe structural pressure is translated into an individualised and consumable life-script of spatial escape. However, the interwoven analysis demonstrates that such an escape has strict limits. Because the underlying exhaustion is deeply rooted in what Han (2015, p. 8) terms the achievement society, geographical relocation offers only temporary therapeutic relief. It ultimately fails to resolve the systemic conditions of temporal acceleration and constant

productivity demands that originally produced the burnout (Rosa and Trejo-Mathys, 2013, p. 151).

Moreover, the research highlights that the very possibility of living otherwise is deeply and unevenly distributed. The utopian script becomes inhabitable almost exclusively for those equipped with prior economic buffers and temporal autonomy. Concurrently, the apparent calm of this alternative lifeworld is maintained through the undervalued and structurally obscured service work of local residents. Recalling Hatton's (2017, p. 338) conceptualisation of invisible work, the thesis reveals that the aestheticised slow life routinely displaces its operational costs onto marginalised local workers and ethnic minority youth who must navigate the demanding realities of the space being utopified. This dynamic exposes a harsh sociological truth. Attempting to resolve structural alienation through individualised lifestyle migration tends to be a fragile and highly exclusionary practice (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009, p. 618). It converts the concept of utopia into a consumer privilege for the mobile few, rather than a shared, equitable social reality.

Ultimately, the significance of these findings extends far beyond Dali. They point to a broader, troubling pattern within contemporary platform societies. Crises of precarious work and existential meaning are increasingly managed through aestheticised lifestyle consumption and privatised micro-utopias. Instead of inciting collective institutional transformation or what Levitas (2013, p. 198) envisions as a genuine, imaginative reconstitution of society, systemic anxieties are absorbed by platform algorithms and repackaged as personal aspirational goals. By rendering the utopian impulse as a spatial product to be purchased and individually performed, the platform economy effectively neutralises the critical potential of social dreaming, ensuring that the fundamental structural inequalities of the urban present remain entirely undisturbed.

The ability to critically deconstruct these privatised micro-utopias is inevitably shaped by the specific positionality from which I encountered both the platform imaginary and the physical field. I entered Dali with a gaze already trained by Rednote, carrying an anticipatory budget horizon and a ready-made aesthetic sense of what slow living

should look like. Yet, I was not simply an objective researcher observing others. I was simultaneously a consumer and a temporary sojourner living inside the exact same aesthetic economy that I aimed to analyse. This dual location mattered fundamentally because it made the contrast between frictionless digital scripts and friction-laden physical realities experiential rather than purely conceptual. What appeared online as a smooth template of healing and autonomy quickly materialised into a complex space of negotiation, where living costs accumulated, temporal autonomy was unevenly distributed, and calm atmospheres depended entirely on continuous backstage work. At the same time, my relative proximity in age to many local young interlocutors shaped the affective textures and intimate disclosures I was able to access. Being perceived as a peer rather than a distant, formal outsider made it significantly easier to recognise the fatigue, ambivalence, and deep scepticism that consistently remain invisible within tourist-facing performances of hospitality. It also reduced the distance between the digital nomad imaginary and the everyday realities that local youth must navigate, allowing me to view utopification not merely as an external story about a destination, but as a lived social situation that some must maintain while others consume. These vantage points are analytically productive, but they also carry inherent interpretive risks. My conclusions are inevitably informed by my own investments, disappointments, and emotional responses as an individual who was, at least temporarily, living the very life-script under examination. Consequently, this thesis treats reflexivity not as a personal confession, but as a crucial method of transparency, acknowledging how access, rapport, and affect guided what became salient in the analysis. Ethical choices directly follow from this stance. Instead of reproducing highly identifiable personal details, the study prioritises contextual privacy and the strict minimisation of harm, paying particular care to protect local workers and minority youth whose livelihoods could be adversely impacted by unwanted exposure.

However, the methodological choices that enabled these intimate insights also introduce specific limitations. First, the offline ethnographic material is concentrated in Dali's core tourism and sojourning zones. While these are precisely the areas where

utopification is most intense, they do not exhaustively represent the totality of Dali's social life. Second, the platform corpus strictly centres on Rednote, a lifestyle-oriented application governed by specific middle-class aesthetic norms and algorithmic visibility mechanisms. The current analysis may therefore not capture how utopian practices are produced on other platforms or among demographic groups completely disconnected from social media. Third, the empirical strategy is intentionally interpretive and small-scale. The thesis does not claim statistical representativeness, but instead aims for analytic transferability, offering theoretical mechanisms and critical questions that can be rigorously tested in other contexts. Finally, the fieldwork captures a highly time-specific moment. Both platform imaginaries and local tourism economies are profoundly dynamic. Seasonal fluctuations, municipal policy shifts, and algorithm updates can continuously reshape what becomes visible, desirable, and profitable in the spatial economy.

These methodological constraints point directly toward fertile avenues for future research. Comparative platform studies could examine whether similar utopian scripts emerge on platforms with vastly different cultural politics and visibility economies, such as Kuaishou or Douyin. On such platforms, alternative rural utopias may be formatted through entirely different genres of authenticity, physical labour, and class aspiration. Furthermore, longitudinal research could track digital sojourners over time, particularly at the critical juncture where their budget horizon inevitably collapses. Investigating where digital nomads go when savings run out, when the novelty fades, or when familial care obligations reassert themselves would significantly clarify whether utopification functions merely as a temporary pressure release, a lasting reorientation of the life course, or a cyclical mode of coping under permanent structural constraint. Future ethnography could also deepen the standpoint dimension by focusing more exclusively on minority youth and local service workers. Treating these individuals as active knowledge producers in their own right, rather than as mere background conditions to outsiders' imaginaries, would further illuminate how utopification reorganises visibility, recognition, and structural inequality within the

very places it celebrates.

Ultimately, the utopification of Dali must be understood as far more than an algorithmically amplified travel trend. It is a highly contested spatial practice where the desire for a liveable life collides with the harsh realities of platform capitalism and local labour. If the utopian impulse is reduced entirely to a lifestyle product sold through visibility metrics, society risks fatally narrowing its imagination to only those freedoms that can be individually purchased and privately inhabited. The stakes of taking utopia seriously are therefore profoundly political as well as interpretive. As this research illustrates, utopia is most valuable not when it serves as a pacifying aesthetic refuge from urban burnout, but when it operates as a critical method. It must make the present thinkable as changeable, renewing the collective capacity to demand forms of life and human flourishing that are not subsidised by unequal burdens, exclusionary capital, and invisible work.

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Appendix 1: Rednote Thread Corpus (Analytical Summary)

This appendix presents a structured summary of the Rednote threads analysed in the study. Each thread is coded according to its dominant utopian mode and accompanied by key textual, visual, and analytical elements.

ID	Date	Mode	Key Quote	Visual Cue	Analytical Note
T1	2025-05-22	Archaeological	“在云南，不早起、逛早市，看见一种理想生活。”	Dense morning market scenes with fruit stalls, warm-toned canopies, and pedestrian flows.	Constructs Dali as a temporal counter-world where everyday rhythms are detached from urban productivity pressures.
T2	2025-09-13	Ontological	“文明世界外，还有一种正确。”	A solitary figure standing under vast skies and mountain landscapes; poetic composition.	Reconfigures subjectivity by rejecting KPI-based evaluation and legitimising alternative moral frameworks of living.
T3	2025-12-05	Ontological	“大理成为我真正意义上的精神故乡。”	Expansive lake and mountain views combined with reflective personal narrative.	Frames Dali as a site of affective belonging and self-recovery, constructing a narrative of existential return.

ID	Date	Mode	Key Quote	Visual Cue	Analytical Note
T4	2025-08-15	Archaeological (counter-case)	“关于旅居的美好幻想都在慢慢褪去.....”	Diary-style self-recordings and intimate visuals emphasising solitude and emotional difficulty.	Functions as a counter-archive, exposing the limits of utopian narratives and revealing persistent structural anxieties.
T5	2025-06-30	Ontological	“人需要出走，需要在低谷的时候离开原本的生活轨道。”	Calm natural landscapes juxtaposed with inactive laptop and resting body posture.	Re-authorises vulnerability as a legitimate ontological state, reframing withdrawal as necessary self-repair.
T6	2025-05-02	Architectural	“大理不是乌托邦，但你可以靠近它。”	Personal narration over everyday spaces, blending reflection with practical commentary.	Positions utopia as a partial and achievable condition, translating aspiration into moderated, realistic expectations.
T7	2025-05-17	Ontological	“只是行走、观察、呼吸、活着，就很好。”	Small human figures placed within vast natural landscapes; emphasis on scale contrast.	Constructs an ontological minimum where mere existence is legitimised outside productivity-based value systems.
T8	2025-06-28	Ontological	“没有准备好的人生，也可以开始。”	Sunset tones and solitary natural imagery	Normalises uncertainty and incompleteness, framing

ID	Date	Mode	Key Quote	Visual Cue	Analytical Note
				conveying calmness and uncertainty.	movement itself as a legitimate mode of being.
T9	2025-07-19	Architectural	“大理一个月生活成本大概是多少？”	Café interiors combined with structured budget breakdowns and cost categories.	Translates utopian desire into calculable living conditions, rendering “slow life” as an operational and reproducible plan.
T10	2025-04-30	Architectural	“毕业后在大理建了三套小院。”	Construction scenes, before–after renovation images, and lifestyle documentation.	Frames utopia as a buildable project, linking spatial production to entrepreneurial and platform logics.
T11	2025-04-16	Architectural	“今天做了很多杯咖啡，也认识了很多。”	Warm-toned café environment with dense social interactions and handwritten messages.	Demonstrates how utopian atmospheres are sustained through affective labour and everyday social reciprocity.
T12	2025-05-06	Architectural	“这样的一天，简单但充实。”	Daily activity sequences ending with self-tracking (Apple Watch) metrics.	Recontextualises self-tracking as communicative archiving, transforming metrics into markers of livable rhythm.

Appendix 2: Interview Guide

This semi-structured interview guide was used to explore how local ethnic minority Gen Z youth experience, interpret, and negotiate everyday life in Dali, particularly in relation to circulating online imaginaries. The questions were designed to be conversational and accessible, translating theoretical concepts into everyday language. They were asked flexibly and adapted to each participant's specific work and life situation.

1. Warming Up: Everyday Rhythms & Work

(Establishing the baseline of local lived reality)

- Can you briefly introduce yourself? (e.g., age, where you grew up in Dali, what you do for a living right now?)
- What does a typical day look like for you, from the moment you wake up to when you go to sleep?
- A lot of tourists come here to experience the "slow life." But honestly, are you busy or tired on a daily basis?
- Do you feel your own pace of life is different from the tourists you meet?

2. The Online Hype vs. Local Reality

(Archaeological mode / Diagnosing the fading fantasy and cost of living)

- Do you swipe Rednote or Douyin often? What kind of "Dali" do you usually see on these apps?
- When young people from big cities come here and talk about escaping *neijuan* (involution) or "lying flat," how do you feel when you hear that? Can you relate to them, or does it feel distant?

- From what you've seen, how long does that "relaxed" feeling actually last for outsiders?
- Rednote makes living here look very cheap and effortless. As a local, what do you think about the actual cost of living and housing here now? Do you think the "slow life" actually requires a lot of money?

3. Behind the Scenes: Working in the "Utopia"

(Architectural mode / Invisible work, aesthetic labour, and structural pressure)

- *(For those in cafes/guesthouses)* Visitors often post about how warm, aesthetic, and chill your workplace is. But what is the most exhausting part of your job that the cameras don't capture?
- Do you feel the pressure to always maintain a "perfect, welcoming vibe" for tourists? (e.g., standing for long hours, always having to smile, keeping everything photo-ready)
- Do you feel like you have to suppress your own tiredness just to make sure the guests feel that "Dali healing energy"?

4. The "Local" Label and Cultural Identity

(Ontological mode / The bifurcated subject, staged authenticity, and ethnic identity)

- Tourists and the internet really love the "ethnic vibe" of Dali (like tie-dye, traditional architecture). Do you feel this matches your actual, everyday life?
- Do tourists ever ask you stereotypical questions? (e.g., "Why aren't you wearing traditional Bai clothes?" or "Can you sing folk songs?") How do you respond, and how does it make you feel?
- While the internet celebrates these beautiful ethnic symbols, do you have any worries about your own culture in real life? (e.g., younger kids not speaking the Bai language anymore).

- You work and live alongside all these tourists and digital nomads, but you are also a local. Do you feel like you belong to this "internet-famous Dali," or do you feel a bit stuck in the middle?

5. Concluding Thoughts

- If you could tell internet users one true thing about living in Dali that they probably misunderstand, what would it be?
- What does a "good life" actually mean to you personally right now?
- Is there anything else about your life or work here that we haven't talked about?

Appendix 3: Fieldwork Materials

This appendix provides a selection of raw fieldwork materials to illustrate how everyday spaces and practices in Dali were empirically experienced and observed. These excerpts and images offer a glimpse into the on-the-ground data collection process, capturing the everyday tension between digital imaginaries and material realities.

1. Fieldnote Excerpt

Date: March 2026

Location: Dali Old Town, an "internet-famous" café, and surrounding rural areas.

Observation:

Several locations commonly associated with the “Dali lifestyle” are characterised by a sharp tension between visual calmness and practical physical activity. In one highly recommended café, visitors occupied tables and balcony spaces primarily for taking photographs, often leaving shortly after capturing their desired images. While the front-stage setting appeared quiet and aesthetically ordered (closely matching the Rednote vibe), the flow of people through the space was actually continuous and heavily congested. Staff members were observed moving rapidly in the background, hurriedly clearing tables and managing queues to maintain the café's visual consistency.

Similar dynamics were observed in rural areas, such as a wheat field on the outskirts of Dali. The field functioned simultaneously as working agricultural land and a photographic site. Visitors entered the field in small groups, carefully arranging their bodies, props, and clothing to align with an expected pastoral aesthetic, often waiting in line for the "best" angle.

Analytic Memo:

What strikes me most across these sites is how much physical effort goes into

maintaining the illusion of "effortlessness." The relaxed, slow-paced atmosphere online is clearly not a natural property of the place, but something actively produced. In the café, the tourists get to perform "slowness," but only because the local staff are subjected to an accelerated, highly disciplined work rhythm to keep the background pristine. Similarly, the wheat field is fascinating—it's an everyday agricultural space that gets temporarily turned into a stage. People are not just experiencing rural life; they are actively curating it for an external gaze. The "utopia" here requires constant spatial management and invisible labour.