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Douyin Short Videos and Chinese Rural Youth: Interpreting Platformed Rural Youth Cultural Production in A Shifting Rural Policy Context

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Abstract

This thesis explores the role of Douyin short videos in shaping the cultural production practices of Chinese rural youth within the broader context of shifting rural policies. Since 2018, China has intensified its focus on digital rural development, which, coinciding with the rise of short-video platforms such as Douyin, has provided rural youth with unprecedented opportunities for self-expression, economic advancement, and social engagement. Against this backdrop, this research investigates how rural youth producers (RYPs) create and disseminate digital content; how their cultural production is influenced by national policies and platform mechanisms; and how their engagement with Douyin shapes public perceptions of rural life.

The study employs a multi-method qualitative approach, combining digital ethnography, policy analysis, and semi-structured interviews with rural content producers. The findings reveal that rural short videos have transformed the representation of rural China, thereby shifting away from past stereotypes of marginalisation towards more empowered, digitally mediated narratives. However, this process is not solely driven by individual creators: rather, it is shaped by the interplay of state-led rural policies, platform governance, and the economic imperatives of digital labour. The research identifies three key dimensions in this dynamic: (1) the role of rural policies in shaping digital cultural production; (2) the evolving narrative strategies and themes in rural short videos; and (3) the challenges and opportunities faced by rural youth in the digital intermediation process.

By situating Douyin's rural short-video culture within the broader framework of platformisation, digital intermediation, and state governance, this thesis contributes to contemporary discussions on digital labour, rural modernisation, and media regulation in China. It highlights how rural youth, despite structural constraints, are leveraging digital platforms to negotiate their identities, build new economic pathways, and engage in broader socio-political discourses. This research thus offers critical insights into the intersection of technology, policy, and youth culture, positioning rural short-video production as a key site of transformation in China's digital rural landscape.

To Hanru,

You gave this journey its purpose and poetry.

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This research began in the later stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and was completed during a time of global uncertainty. As my first academic attempt to engage with such a complex world, it would not have been possible without the support of many people.

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Author's Declaration

This thesis represents the original work of Kun Fang unless otherwise stated in the text. The research on which it was based was carried out at the University of Glasgow under the academic supervision of Dr. Lynn Whitaker and Dr. Melanie Selfe during the period from October 2021 to October 2024.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning
CAC	Cyberspace Administration of China
CNN	China News Network
CNNIC	China Internet Network Information Centre
CPC	Communist Party of China
CYLC	Communist Youth League of China
HRS	Household Responsibility System
RYPs	Rural youth producers
IAED	Institute of Agricultural Economics and development
ICT	Information and communication technology
MOA	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs
PRC	People's Republic of China
OCP	One Child Policy
MCN	Multi-Channel Network
NRPS	New Rural Pension Scheme
NRTA	National Radio and Television Administration

Glossary of Chinese Terms

Chinese term (pinyin)	English translation	Explanation
杀马特 (sha ma te)	Smart/Shamate	Shamate, sometimes translated as 'Smart', refers to a Chinese subculture that emerged in the early 2000s among rural migrant youth. It is characterised by exaggerated hairstyles, flamboyant clothing, and a rebellious attitude, influenced by Japanese 'Visual Kei' and cyberpunk aesthetics. The movement is/was both a form of self-expression and a way for marginalised youth to assert their identity in urban environments.
空巢 (kong chao)	Empty Nest	A term used to describe elderly people in China whose children have moved away, often to work in urban areas, leaving them living alone in rural or suburban settings. The phenomenon is associated with rapid urbanisation, migration patterns, and changing family structures in modern China.
家 (jia)	Family	In Chinese society, 'family' (家) is a core social and cultural unit that extends beyond the nuclear family to include multiple generations. Family values emphasise filial piety, collective responsibility, and intergenerational support, all of which are deeply influenced by Confucian traditions.
户口制度 (hu kou zhi du)	Household registration system	China's household registration system that categorises citizens as either rural or urban residents. The system historically restricted rural migrants' access to education,

		healthcare, and employment in cities, contributing to social stratification. Though reformed in recent years, the hukou system continues to impact labour mobility and social welfare distribution.
土味 (tu wei)	Tuwei	A slang term meaning 'earthy taste', referring to an internet-driven aesthetic associated with rural grassroots culture. Tuwei culture often features exaggerated, kitschy, and nostalgic elements, sometimes mocked for being unsophisticated, but also embraced as a symbol of local authenticity.
社会人 (she hui ren)	Shehuiren	A youth subculture in China that blends elements of street fashion, hip-hop influences, and gangster-like posturing. The term 'Shehuiren' (literally 'society people') originally referred to individuals involved in underground or marginal activities, but has since evolved into an online meme culture reflecting exaggerated toughness and defiance.
领导人 (ling dao ren)	Leader	Refers to political leaders in China, particularly high-ranking officials in the Communist Party of China (CPC). The term is often used to denote figures such as the President, Premier, and Party Secretary, highlighting their authority and influence over national policy.
社会主义核心价值观 (she hui zhu yi he xin jia zhi guan)	Core Socialist Values	A set of twelve ideological principles promoted by the Chinese government to guide social and political life. These values are prosperity, democracy, civility, harmony, freedom, equality, justice, the rule of law, patriotism,

		dedication, integrity, and friendship. They serve as a framework for national identity and moral guidance.
中国优秀传统文化 (zhong guo you xiu chuan tong wen hua)	China's Excellent Traditional Culture	A selectively defined corpus of cultural heritage from China's pre-modern history, encompassing the philosophical, ethical, and artistic traditions deemed to possess enduring value and relevance for contemporary society.
红包 (hong bao)	Red Envelope	A small red packet filled with money, traditionally given during Chinese New Year, weddings, and other celebrations as a symbol of good luck and prosperity. Digital red envelopes have also become popular with the rise of mobile payment apps.
火炕 (huo kang)	Heated Bed	A traditional northern Chinese bed with a built-in heating system, commonly found in rural homes. The 'kang' (炕) is heated by a fire or stove underneath and serves as both a sleeping and living space, particularly in colder regions.
白酒 (bai jiu)	Chinese Baijiu	A strong distilled liquor made from sorghum or other grains, often consumed during formal banquets, business meetings, and festive gatherings. Baijiu is a key part of Chinese drinking culture and is known for its high alcohol content and distinctive flavour.
青年 (qing nian)	Youth	Young people typically within the age range of 15 to 35 years in the Chinese context, though definitions may vary based on cultural, academic, and policy perspectives. This term is commonly used in demographic studies, social policy, and youth development programmes.

农村青年 (nong cun qing nian)	Rural Youth	Chinese young people who live in or originate from rural areas. They are often the focus of development policies due to issues such as rural-urban migration, access to education, employment opportunities, and agricultural modernisation.
正能量 (zheng neng liang)	Positive Energy	A state-endorsed ideological concept in contemporary China, referring to socially uplifting, morally constructive, and politically harmonious content that promotes optimism, stability, patriotism, and collective unity.

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Introduction

The Motivations

'After alleviating poverty, what are the development opportunities for cultural production in rural China?' was the first inspired question of this research, raised and discussed by myself and other members of the research team on *Third-Party Evaluation of Targeted Poverty Alleviation in Hebei Provinc*e supported by the *National Social Science Foundation*, in Baoding, China, in 2018. At that time, I was examining the poverty alleviation process of several rural areas mainly by focusing on the economic indices required to meet a certain annual income standard. That rural economy fieldwork concluded in 2020, and the results were significant: The Chinese government announced a 'complete victory[1]' in that campaign against poverty. During visits to more than 30 rural villages in that project, revenue items related to digital media appeared frequently, suggesting both economic and cultural significance. Among them, the occasional appearance of the term 'short video' and expressions related to information and communication technology (ICT) facilities suggested the initial area of exploration for this doctoral study, piquing my interest in the relationship between rural economy and technology: how has digital media, mainly short videos, influenced the cultural production of rural groups and how has it further influenced their cultural and social life?

Inspired by the above-mentioned rural development status and associated cultural issues, this research attempts to bring together many aspects that have not been examined before. What is the current rural digital cultural production taking place on new media platforms? How are cultural production processes affected by politics, platforms and stakeholders? How do the group known as Rural Youth Producers (RYPs) interact with these influencing factors? The primary motivation is that exploration of these aspects is scoped within a specific

[1] Chinese President Xi Jinping delivered a speech in 2021 and awarded the honorary title of National Model for Poverty Alleviation. In his speech, he announced that China has achieved a comprehensive victory in the fight against poverty, all 98.99 million rural poor people have been lifted out of poverty under the current standards, all 832 poor counties have been lifted out of poverty, all 128,000 poor villages have been removed from the list, and regional overall poverty has been resolved.

historical period. ‘Rural Digital Development Strategy’ appeared as a concept for the first time in China’s rural policies in 2018 and related content has increased year by year; short video media became popular globally from around 2019; poverty-stricken rural areas in China have reportedly disappeared in 2020; the pandemic lockdown after 2020 has intensified online consumption of new media; and, from 2023 to now, there have been lively arguments and debates around the world on the regulation of new media and platforms. The convergence of these issues in China and globally, or, in contemporary terms, the ‘crisis moment’ in various senses, would suggest that the popularity of rural short videos on Douyin cannot be regarded as accidental, but is a dynamic cultural production process with explanatory potential rooted in the economic, political, and social fabric of this historical period. Under these unforeseen changes in the general environment, this research began by exploring RYPs’ forms of self-expression and the empowerment offered by the Douyin platform, and gradually incorporating conjunctive perspectives (Bennett, 2016). By examining interaction between Chinese rural political changes and rural short video production, while taking into account platform mechanisms, algorithms, and RYPs’ production processes, I interpret the fluid ecology of rural short video production as full of opportunities and challenges.

Why do rural short videos on Douyin matter?

Firstly, the nationwide popularity of the Douyin platform has driven the rapid rise of short videos in rural areas. Rural producers express themselves by producing diversified short video content, interacting with mobile audiences, opening personal platform stores, and selling agricultural products. These streaming events usually take place in identifiable rural scenes, such as rural families, rural communities, rural natural landscapes. The content of short videos is also diverse, ranging from family stories and daily activities, such as fieldwork and business, to entertainment performances, such as personal singing and dancing (Douyin, n.d.). This new form of digitised rural content has achieved massive popularity and personal financial success, becoming an important part of the cultural production taking place on Douyin, the leading short video sharing platform. As of the 2024 data analysis, the number of short video views under the rural life tag had reached 961.95 billion (data collected by the author, 2024). In just a few years, rural short videos have greatly changed the daily life and economy of China’s rural youth, as well as the mainstream public conceptualisation of rural space.

Secondly, one must acknowledge that rural youth, as the main force behind rural short videos, have constructed a positive impression of rural China, which is in sharp contrast to the traditional media's depiction of rural areas and rural youth in earlier years, which, when visible, was often stigmatised and stereotyped (Wang, 2016). This stigma may have originated from China's 杀马特 culture[2] (or translated as Shamate or Smart culture) that attracted the attention of academic circles and mainstream society in its early years: *Smart* culture is considered a 'failed attempt to move closer to the mainstream' (Huang, 2020, p. 267), and rural youth groups are also regarded by mainstream society as 'exaggerated hairstyles, strange clothes, and heavy makeup' (Huang, 2020, p. 267). Although changes in information and communication technology and agricultural production models since the 2010s have altered traditional lifestyles in rural areas, 'rural youth' at this stage had not been regarded as an independent cultural group. From the perspective of cultural studies, if Smart culture has the potential to explain the lifestyle of Chinese rural groups and China's economic and social structure in the past decade of the 21st century, then I posit that, from the 2020s to the present, rural youth, as an organic group within the vibrant Chinese youth culture, express a completely different digital rural scene, which is closely related to the current policies, lifestyles, and production models of rural China.

As mentioned at the beginning of this introduction, such cultural products are largely influenced by national policies and platforms. These influences are complex and not one-directional. From the past ten years, rural cultural development has sometimes been discussed in rural policy texts, but it has remained a relatively small part of the overall rural governance and development policy. But, starting in 2018, with the promulgation of policy texts related to rural digital development, concepts such as rural cultural subjectivity, rural internet, rural e-commerce, rural digital culture, and related topics appear to have received increasing attention from policymakers. For example, in 2018, the phrase 'rural digital

[2]杀马特(Smart) culture emerged in China in the early 2000s as an underground subculture among working-class youth, particularly rural migrant workers. Characterised by exaggerated hairstyles, colorful fashion, and a rebellious attitude, Shamate drew inspiration from Japanese 'Visual Kei', punk, and cyber-goth aesthetics

development' appeared for the first time in the Government's *No.1 Central Document*,[3] emphasising the importance of deepening the integration of internet technology and agricultural production. After four years of focus on rural digital development issues and policy formulation, in 2022, the government's *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022-2025)* was officially launched as an important guide for various regions and departments in China to promote digital rural work during the period of rural revitalisation.

At the same time, with the high integration of internet technology and rural production models, short video platforms, especially Douyin, have launched the '*New Farmer Plan*', which has supported many young rural creators for four consecutive years since 2020, further accelerating the development, production and distribution of rural short video. In the process of accelerating the development of rural short videos on the Douyin platform, the rural image promoted by the *New Farmer Plan* warrants attention. In September 2024, the Douyin platform had amassed 748 million monthly active users (Thomala, 2024) in China. There is no doubt that the Douyin platform plays an important role in guiding public opinion in the process of rural cultural governance in China. Therefore, the production and dissemination of rural short videos, the promotion activities and mechanisms of the Douyin platform, and the dissemination of rural policies appear to form a network of interactive power exchanges. This doctoral study focuses on rural short video production, a representative cultural production process of rural youth. It helps to explain the interactive relationship between rural cultural production, platforms, and policies; and explores the cultural production issues of RYPs as a group, their communication practices, as well as the cultural content communication ecology of the short video platform.

However, current exploration of scenarios wherein policy, platforms, and cultural production interact is scarce. Existing research on digital content production in rural China includes the contingency and authenticity of state discourse and short video content (Lin and de Kloet, 2019; Chen, Kaye and Zeng, 2021; Zhou and Teng, 2023); exploitation and

[3] The No.1 Central Document (中央一号文件) is an annual policy document released by the Chinese government, typically focusing on rural and agricultural development. As one of the most important policy guidelines issued by the Communist Party of China (CPC) each year: it outlines strategic priorities, economic reforms, and development initiatives.

empowerment (Zhou and Liu, 2021); and the characteristics of rural short video content itself (Cao and Cao, 2021). However, these studies focus on text analysis, short video content analysis, and platform analysis, and with few direct examinations of the production processes and experiences. In addition to researching the short video content that has been selectively displayed to the public, there is a need for direct investigation on how young rural producers interact with national policies and platform mechanisms, the types of personal capital they have accumulated, the challenges they face, and how they respond to these challenges. Currently, such research is lacking. If these interactive relationships are not considered, the integrity and conditions of rural short video cultural production processes in the digital intermediary process will remain invisible, making it difficult to track the future development direction of rural digital culture.

The above-mentioned heated discussions in industry and academia in recent years on the cultural production of short video platforms have provided valuable experience and insights for this study. In terms of subject scope, the discussion in this study is largely influenced by the paradigms of cultural research, production research, and cultural policy research, to maintain a 'circuit' thinking on the cultural production process of rural short videos. This fluid, circular thinking enables the author to remain attentive to the interactions between multiple parties to seek more profound explanations. The findings that highlight this point include detailed explanations of the communication dynamics surrounding China's rural policies, the media ecology of the Douyin platform, and how RYPs interact with policies and platform ideologies, or engage in negotiation processes. Additionally, in light of the evolving global new media landscape and the growing discussions on platform production issues, this study also seeks to incorporate relatively recent academic perspectives, such as 'digital intermediation', 'algorithmic culture', 'AI and platform regulation', and 'the digital structural transformation of the public sphere'. The aim is to retain a global interpretive perspective while focusing on the 'local' cultural production phenomena in rural Chinese contexts, thereby deepening understanding and offering relevant paradigms. This process is eclectic. Overall, this study is situated at the intersection of the aforementioned subject areas, providing an example of an important cultural production phenomenon in the new media ecology that is popular in China and globally - rural short videos. This article analyses the content forms, policies, platforms, groups, and the interactive relationships between them in the cultural production process, thereby uncovering the story behind contemporary short video production in rural China at this stage.

Research Aims and Questions

As mentioned earlier, rural short videos are not a new research object. However, there has so far been a lack of attention to the cultural production experiences of RYPs or on how this cultural production exists within the interactive context of policy and platform ideology. In other words, rural short videos are an important - and perhaps the most representative - cultural product of contemporary rural youth culture. Their cultural production process is not only a response to content and form, but also the dissemination of contemporary rural policies and the Douyin platform. While analyses of media ecology are valuable, this research perspective remains largely underexplored.

The main purpose of this research is to critically analyse the content and form of popular rural short videos on the Douyin platform and the RYPs' cultural production experience, and to further examine their interactive relationship with relevant national policies and the Douyin platform. Specifically, first, this study aims to construct the relevant policy scenarios behind the emergence of rural short video culture. This is achieved by conceptualising policy communication as a loop that connects policy texts, platforms and RYPs, analysing the main policy materials relevant to this study and forming core policy concepts. Second, the focus on the short video content itself is completed through digital ethnography. By maintaining online diaries of 300 rural short videos, I explore the contemporary rural short video landscape and examine how RYPs are constructed and imagined through these videos, investigating the themes discussed and the public discourse on rural life that is expressed. This part of the research considers all aspects of the short video medium, such as characters, scenes, props, platform special effects, background music and more. Third, this study aims to document the unique cultural production experiences of RYPs within the current short video ecology to make up for the previous neglect of rural youths when analysing rural short video culture. The findings in this part also discuss how the cultural production of RYPs exists in the digital intermediation process; and how the experience and methods accumulated by RYPs themselves in interacting with multiple parties, serve to strengthen personal capital and carry out sustainable rural cultural dissemination.

Based on the above purposes, this study addresses the following three research questions:

1. How have Chinese national rural policies since 2018 shaped the digital development of rural areas, and in what ways does the Douyin platform mediate policy dissemination and influence rural short video production?

2. What are the expressive forms of rural short videos and how do rural youth producers construct the digital rural scene?

3. How do rural youth producers participate within the digital intermediation process and how do interactions in this process influence their continued production?

To address the above three research questions, this study primarily employed desk research, digital ethnography, and semi-structured interviews. Please see Chapter 2 Methodology for the specific research design.

Thesis Structure

Following this introduction, Chapter 1 provides a review of the contextual data related to changes in rural life relevant to this study. Specifically, the chapter first examines the current situation of China's rural development and the associated policy background, with particular focus on the impact of the *Reform and Opening Up Policy* after 1978 on rural land, family structures, and lifestyle changes. It then reviews the role of cities, as the other side of China's urban–rural binary structure, which became the destination for waves of migrant workers from rural areas in the early 21st century. Additionally, in light of the challenges faced in both rural and urban contexts during earlier historical periods, the chapter discusses the changing forms and styles of rural youth cultural production, providing a valuable comparative context for the developments explored in this study. As this research focuses on the cultural production and policy impact of rural short videos following the introduction of the Rural Digital Development Strategy in 2018, the inclusion of policy and historical data prior to 2018 serves to provide a comprehensive understanding of lifestyle and policy changes affecting rural youth in China. A review of the contextual literature suggests that the historical stages of rural development, together with national policies, constitute an essential part of the social and cultural background of rural China in the post-reform era.

Chapter 2 presents the literature review for this study. It begins by situating Douyin within the broader Chinese social media landscape, tracing its historical development, technological affordances, and institutional positioning. This section discusses how the platform's mobile-first design, algorithmic recommendation system, and integrated creative tools shape the production, circulation, and reception of short videos. It establishes Douyin as a key site of platformised rural cultural production, where state policy, algorithmic governance, and commercial logic intersect with the creative practices of rural youth producers, framing the subsequent discussion on rural digital cultural production, youth culture, and digital intermediation in rural China.

The second section explores the broader context of rural digital cultural production, considering key issues such as urban–rural exchanges, the personal development of rural youth, and the dissemination of national policy discourse on short video platforms. In reviewing the regulation of platforms such as Douyin, the concept of the public sphere is introduced. While the state–society relationship in China is not strictly binary, the literature provides a useful lens for examining the public dimensions of rural short video content and the motivations and strategies of rural youth producers.

The third section focuses on youth cultural production, reviewing subcultural and post-subcultural research traditions, with particular attention to the characteristics of Chinese subculture studies. It highlights how, within the Chinese context, new media consumption has blurred boundaries between subversion, resistance, class, and style, moderated by both media practices and the unique characteristics of cultural groups. This framework informs the study of rural youth cultural practices, tracing their evolution from resistance-oriented and class-inflected forms to more fluid modes shaped by mainstream media and commercial capital, balancing the social identity of rural communities with the personal identity of creators on Douyin.

The final section addresses core theoretical debates in digital cultural production, focusing on platformisation and digital intermediation. These perspectives offer both a power-dynamics lens and a non-human, algorithmic, and intermediary perspective for understanding the experiences of rural youth producers in short video creation. Specifically, these theories illuminate how RYPs negotiate with platforms and the state in terms of form,

norms, and visibility, while accumulating economic, social, and political capital within a platform-driven environment.

Chapter 3 serves as the methodology chapter, outlining the qualitative methods employed in this study. It begins by explaining the fundamental principles of digital ethnography and how they were applied, including pilot coding and the design of online diaries, and justifies the use of semi-structured interviews. The chapter then details the data analysis process, covering a two-round coding procedure, reflective journaling, and discourse analysis. Finally, it addresses the difficulties and challenges encountered in research design and implementation, including the specific characteristics of rural youth groups, cross-cultural translation issues, and ethical considerations.

Starting from Chapter 4, the thesis moves into the findings chapters. The first findings chapter provides a detailed review of the policy concept of 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' since 2018, analysing the description, core issues, and development trajectory of this policy concept. Key issues include 'Internet + agriculture[4]' production model, rural producer training, increasing income, rural e-commerce, brand empowerment, and rural digital culture guidance. In addition, this part explains why the Douyin platform is incorporated into the dissemination path of China's rural policies: highlighting its role as a policy 'filter' and illustrating this primarily through the *New Farmer Plan* campaign, which implements the *Rural Digital Development Strategy*. Another significant finding is the tentative debate on the impact of the above-mentioned policy communication circuit. I argue that it reflects a power struggle among rural policies, Douyin platforms, and RYPs, disrupting the traditional model of rural cultural production and redefining the boundaries of rural culture. In this way, the chapter completes the analysis of policy content, impact, and Douyin's role in dissemination, addressing answering RQ1: *How have Chinese national rural policies since 2018 shaped the digital development of rural areas, and in what ways*

[4] The *Internet+Agriculture* policy is part of China's broader *Internet Plus* initiative introduced in 2015, which aims to integrate internet technologies with traditional industries, including agriculture. This policy promotes the use of e-commerce platforms, digital supply chains, and smart farming technologies to enhance rural economic development and bridge the rural-urban digital divide (State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

does the Douyin platform mediate policy dissemination and influence rural short video production?

Chapter 5 presents the key findings of the content analysis of rural short videos. Drawing on online diary recordings, coding, and thematic analysis of 300 rural short videos, four main themes are identified, including *rural family drama*, *rural sitcoms*, *rural video blogs*, and *rural short documentary*. Each theme is distinguished by specific content and formal features, collectively illustrating the diversity of rural short video production examined in this study. Beyond thematic categorisation, the shared characteristics among these genres reveal two overarching features that construct rural discourses under the 'digital public rural sphere' on Douyin, including a *discourse of deindustrialisation* in representations of rural life and a *negotiated rhetoric* in self-expression. Together, these dimensions define the cultural style of rural short videos and contribute to a post-public sphere understanding of how widely discussed rural issues are articulated on the Douyin platform. In this way, the chapter addresses RQ2: *What are the expressive forms of rural short videos, and how do rural youth producers construct the digital rural scene?*

Chapter 6 provides an in-depth exploration of the cultural production processes of RYPs, addressing findings related to RQ3: *How do rural youth producers participate in the digital intermediation process, and how do interactions in this process influence their continued production?* Situating rural short video production within the theoretical framework of digital intermediation, this chapter first analyses RYPs' strategies for accumulating various forms of capital. It finds that RYPs generate economic capital through platform operations and consumption practices on Douyin, while social capital derived from online celebrity status extends beyond the videos themselves into offline rural life. This process also involves the acquisition of political capital through tentative engagement with public issues. However, these forms of capital accumulation simultaneously expose the power interventions embedded within platform mechanisms and policy frameworks. Furthermore, the 'algorithm', frequently mentioned in interviews, emerges as both a source of creative constraint and a site of negotiation. The findings reveal that RYPs experience challenges in understanding and navigating algorithmic systems, while their attempts to cater to algorithmic preferences complicate their creative autonomy.

Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarising the key findings and synthesising the concepts and themes concerning power relations. It discusses the main results of the study, considers the potential future trajectories of rural short video culture, and reflects on the governance of the Douyin platform alongside broader structural issues. The chapter then outlines the implications of the findings for rural policy before addressing the study's limitations and suggesting directions for future research.

Chapter One: The Tales of Rural Youth between the Command Economy and the Digital Era (1980s-2010s)

Between the decline of the command economy and the rise of the digital era, China's rural youth navigated profound economic, social, and cultural transformations. The restructuring of rural family life, shifts in land ownership policies, and large-scale migration to urban centres collectively shaped their identities, aspirations, and economic choices. These changes were not only responses to national reform policies but also reflections of the evolving dynamics between rural and urban spaces. During this period, rural youth occupied a dual position—as contributors to urban labour markets and as custodians of rural traditions. While many sought improved economic opportunities in cities, they remained deeply connected to their hometowns, fostering a hybrid, 'semi-urbanised' identity. Cultural expressions such as the Shamate (SMART) subculture highlighted their struggles with urban integration and rural belonging, while shifting family structures redefined their roles and expectations. These historical transformations laid the groundwork for contemporary digital rural cultural production, in which rural youth producers (RYPs) employ platforms such as Douyin to reinterpret their experiences and assert agency within China's rapidly modernising society. This chapter provides an overview of the historical forces that shaped rural youth from the 1980s to the 2010s, contextualising the emergence of digital cultural production as a new form of self-expression and economic participation. Understanding these transitions is crucial for examining how rural youth today navigate questions of identity, mobility, and creativity in the digital age.

Rural families and land

Different regions and cultures may have varied understandings of rurality. In the late twentieth century, scholars such as Jones (1995) and Hoggart, Buller and Black (1995) defined rurality through three key indicators: land characteristics, population structure, and occupational structure. These scholars argued that open landscapes and sparsely populated settlements were typical features of rural structures, widely regarded as defining traits. Additionally, the occupational structure of rural areas was closely tied to these characteristics, being predominantly agricultural. However, within the context of Chinese tradition, the concept of rurality incorporates another significant element: the family settlement (Pik-chu, 2012).

Thus, understanding the unique social life of Chinese rural youth necessitates a focus on the core concept of 'family' (jia 家). In traditional Chinese thought, kinship ties are central, and ancestors or elders play a vital spiritual role in preserving family inheritance (Chu and Yu, 2009). This respect for the spiritual role of elders is embodied in 'filial piety' (xiaodao 孝道), which is regarded as the cornerstone of Chinese familial values (Whyte, 2004). Filial piety represents both a spiritual obligation—requiring younger family members to show enduring respect towards their parents or grandparents—and a material responsibility (Greenhalgh, 1985), as children are expected to provide lifelong economic support to their parents. This enduring family tradition has profoundly shaped the lives of rural youth in China.

The changes in the family structure of rural China at the end of the last century profoundly affected the spiritual and material connections between intergenerational members in traditional rural families. Wang's (2019) study on the evolution of rural family structures identifies 1990 as a pivotal point for these transformations. Before 1990, rural families in China were predominantly multi-child households, and rural youth typically lived independently, forming new families upon reaching adulthood. However, after 1990, the combined effects of economic Reform and Opening Up policies, together with the earlier

One Child Policy (OCP)[5], led to a significant decrease in the number of children in rural families. This shift resulted in smaller average family sizes and a notable redirection of rural youth employment goals toward non-agricultural sectors (Wang, 2019, p. 102).

During this period, the popularisation of agricultural mechanisation further diversified employment opportunities for rural youth, prompting many to seek work beyond their villages. This transition weakened the family's role as the primary unit of production and loosened economic ties among family members (Ge et al., 2020). Additionally, the reduction in daily intergenerational interactions contributed to a decline in traditional family functions such as education and elderly care. As a result of these shifts, rural families in China evolved from traditional extended households to nuclear families**,** reflecting broader trends towards miniaturisation and diversification (Li et al., 2020; Shi, Gao and Fang, 2022). Consequently, the spiritual and material dimensions traditionally associated with the concept of 'family' were significantly eroded during this period.

However, with the weakening of traditional family concepts, youths in rural families maintain close family ties while also exercising personal initiative. In analysing the individualisation of rural families, Xing (2017) interpreted the relationship between individuals and families from an economic perspective: 'Rural individuals still think and practise within the framework of family concepts' (p. 35). Xing's view does not fully individualise Chinese rural families but asserts that family concepts remain deeply rooted in rural China. Within this evolutionary trend, individuals can provide more planning and support in family crises due to their evolving personalised thinking and capabilities. Combining the views of Xing (2017) and Wang (2019), in cooperative family relationships, rural parents typically engage in traditional agricultural work, while rural youths seek non-agricultural positions to create viable contemporary rural lives. As noted in Chapter 5, numerous rural short videos related to family present contemporary manifestations of family spirit, such as filial piety and responsibility; RYPs who remain in rural areas and engage in cultural production through new media and creative work are deeply connected with family

[5] One Child Policy (OCP): In the late 1970s, the Chinese government enacted the one-child policy, which was more coercive than the previous family planning policy. Couples who violated the family planning policy and had children illegally were subject to severe monetary and non-monetary penalties.

population mobility in this historical period. Therefore, the historical context of changes in rural family structure provides a crucial reference for interpreting rural youth short video production and its underlying causes rooted in family life.

The above general description of the evolution of rural family population structure and spiritual traditions reflects the role changes and motivations of rural youth in family relationships during this period. The main reason for the change in the occupational structure of rural families is attributed to shifts in the allocation of land resources, which remain the core of rural economic production. In short, policy changes related to land resources during this period compelled rural youth to face resource constraints and broaden their career choices.

Currently, land in rural China is owned by farmers' collectives, which are the holders of land property rights. This is clearly stipulated in important legal documents such as the Constitution and the Land Management Law[6], although the term 'farmer collectives' is defined somewhat ambiguously. It specifically encompasses township farmer collective economic organisations, village farmer collective economic organisations, and village collective economic organisations. This form of collective land ownership emerged during the agricultural cooperative movement and the people's commune movement (from around 1956) and was inherited during the Reform and Opening Up period[7], aiming to 'implement the separation of ownership and management rights to mobilise farmers' enthusiasm for production' and 'improve labour productivity' (Zhao, 2013, p. 86).

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[6] The Land Management Law (土地管理法), first enacted in 1986 and amended multiple times, regulates land use, expropriation, and protection of arable land, playing a crucial role in China's urbanisation and rural land reform (Ho and Lin, 2003).

[7] Reform and Opening Up (改革开放) refers to the series of economic and political reforms initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978 that transformed China's economy from a centrally planned system to a more market-oriented one. These reforms included decentralisation of economic decision-making, encouragement of foreign investment, the establishment of Special Economic Zones (SEZs), and the gradual privatisation of state-owned enterprises. As a result, China experienced rapid economic growth, industrialisation, and integration into the global economy (Naughton, 2007).

The ‘Household Responsibility System (HRS)’ in the 1980s marked the beginning of rural economic reform. Collective land ownership was retained, but production and management rights were allocated to individual farmers. This system represented a key reform in China’s agricultural sector, replacing the previous production team-based system with a structure in which individual households became the primary units of production and income distribution (Lin, 1988, p. 199). The transition to the HRS enhanced farmers’ motivation to adopt new technologies, which in turn accelerated the spread of agricultural innovations (Lin, 1991). The HRS has been analysed as having a ‘long-term, dynamic impact on the growth of agricultural productivity, liberating rural productivity and fundamentally transforming China’s agricultural economy’ (Lin, 1992, p. 48). However, because land allocation in the early 1980s was based on population size, the amount of land assigned could not increase with family growth. The policy of ‘no increase in land with an increase in population, and no reduction in land with a decrease in population’ (as stipulated in the *Current Policy Measures for Agricultural and Rural Economic Development*[8], 1993) protected the basic rights and interests of rural families to some extent, but also led to resource scarcity within households, particularly when the new labour force required an independent source of income.

The fixed nature of land resources directly constrained the economic development opportunities of rural youth. With the mechanisation of agricultural production, traditional labour-intensive agricultural methods could not provide sufficient employment for the growing labour force. Studies indicate that as agricultural productivity intensified, surplus labour from rural areas increasingly sought opportunities in cities (Rozelle and Swinnen, 2004). In pursuit of higher income and an independent economic foundation, rural youth turned their attention to urban centres. Particularly in the 1990s and 2000s, the expanding urban industrial and service sectors offered abundant employment for migrant workers, and the income disparity between urban and rural areas (Qian and Zhu, 2018, pp. 2–3) was a major driver of rural-to-urban migration. This economic transformation also imposed

[8] The Current Policy Measures for Agricultural and Rural Economic Development (1993) emphasised market-oriented reforms, increased investment in rural infrastructure, and the promotion of township and village enterprises (TVEs) as key drivers of rural economic growth. It also reinforced land-use rights aimed at enhancing agricultural productivity and sought to balance rural and urban development (Huang and Rozelle, 1996).

significant social costs. The phenomenon of 'empty nest (kongchao 空巢)' (Wu, Zhang and Huang, 2022) became increasingly evident, as the migration of young adults created challenges for left-behind families, including the care of children and elderly members (Du, Wang and Guo, 2013). Simultaneously, the persistence of long-term land contracts meant that families of young migrant workers remained responsible for agricultural operations, forcing many individuals to balance the dual pressures of urban employment and rural agricultural responsibilities (Zhao, 2002).

Entering the 21st century, the *Land Transfer*[9] policy provided new employment opportunities for rural youth by enabling farmers to rent, transfer or contract land management rights. Some young people who migrated to cities secured stable rental income through land leasing, allowing them to concentrate on urban development. Those who remained in their hometowns began to employ modern technologies to innovate agricultural management practices. For instance, rural entrepreneurs increasingly utilise e-commerce platforms to market agricultural products (Huang, Gao and Rozelle, 2015), generating new sources of income. This innovation not only increased the income levels of rural youth but also transformed their lifestyles, facilitating their transition from traditional agricultural labourers to contemporary creative producers. The innovative consciousness of contemporary RYPs in short video production, the focus of this study, is likely inherited from the mobile lifestyle enabled by the fixed and transferable nature of land resources during this period. This dynamic lifestyle underpins the subsequent analysis of the urban–rural relationship in the next section.

Wandering between urban-rural

As noted in the previous section, changes in family structure and the allocation of land resources have brought about two significant transformations in the lifestyle of rural youth.

[9] China's *Land Transfer Policy* (土地流转政策) refers to the legal framework allowing rural land-use rights to be transferred, leased, or subcontracted while maintaining collective ownership. This policy was formally introduced to promote agricultural modernisation, enhance land productivity, and support rural economic development. The 2008 *Rural Land Contract Law* amendments further clarified the rights of farmers to lease or transfer their land-use rights, aiming to encourage large-scale farming and investment in rural areas (Deininger et al., 2014).

The first is the shift from participants in the family economy to independent economic actors. Traditional agriculture could no longer provide sufficient income, and working in cities enabled rural youth to achieve relative economic independence, simultaneously altering conventional family role divisions. The second transformation is the transition from rural labourers to urban workers. This career change not only reshaped their economic foundations but also had a profound impact on their consumption patterns and value systems. In navigating this social identity shift between rural and urban contexts, rural youth have confronted challenges of recognition while accumulating economic and cultural capital, positioning themselves as potential modern creative producers.

First, according to Bai and Li (2008), China's 'urbanisation' is explained as follows:

> Whether it is a developed or developing country, urbanisation is generally achieved through the migration of rural people to cities. If they are not landless farmers, they sell their land and houses in the countryside, or rent out the land, taking a sum of money with them. Assets move to cities to settle down. The situation in China is different. Amid rapid urbanisation, household registration (hukou) migration remains relatively rare (p. 4).

This explanation illustrates how the household registration system (*hukou* 户口 or *huji* 户籍*)*[10] renders China's 'urbanisation' unique. Specifically, the system allows mobility without altering household registration status, resulting in rural youth who migrate to cities for work being classified as 'temporary residents'. Established in the 1950s, China's household registration system strictly divides the social identities of urban and rural residents and forms a resource allocation model based on these distinctions.

While the contract responsibility system mentioned in the previous section helped to unlock rural productivity, policy-driven resource allocation has continued to favour cities. For example, the proportion of investment in rural infrastructure remains significantly lower than

[10] China's household registration system was introduced in 1958 as a means of regulating population movement and controlling access to public services. It categorises individuals as either urban or rural residents, restricting rural migrants' ability to access education, healthcare, and social welfare in cities (Chan and Buckingham, 2008).

in urban areas (Rozelle and Swinnen, 2004), and substantial fiscal subsidies and preferential policies are directed toward urban industrial development and foreign investment (Lin, 1992). This macro-policy bias has intensified urban–rural economic disparities. For much of the period following the Reform and Opening Up, cities have served as the core engines of economic growth, while rural areas were positioned as reserve bases for providing food and labour to support urban development (Lin, 1992). Under this systemic bias, urban residents benefit from superior public services, including education, healthcare, and housing security, while rural youth who migrate to cities face significant restrictions due to their 'migrant worker' status. This 'unequal treatment' exacerbates their marginalisation in urban settings (Chan and Buckingham, 2008, p. 586). Furthermore, these identity-based restrictions prevent rural youth from accessing the same social security benefits as urban residents. Migrant workers and their families are often excluded from essential services such as medical insurance (Wang and Fan, 2012), pension insurance (Zhao, 2002), and access to quality education for their children (Chan and Buckingham, 2008).

In addition, rural youth who migrate to cities for work often face cultural and social discrimination from urban residents. They are excluded and marginalised by society because of their rural background, accent, and behavioural habits (Wang and Fan, 2012, p. 736). This discrimination impacts their urban employment opportunities in several ways. On one hand, rural youth are often relegated to low-end, labour-intensive industries such as construction, manufacturing, and services. These jobs generally require more physical labour and rarely involve cultural production, while these sectors typically offer low wages, poor working conditions, and minimal labour protection (Xu, 2013). As a result, the average income of migrant workers is significantly lower than that of urban-registered workers (Meng and Zhang, 2001), with income gaps persisting even when they hold the same positions (Zhao, 2002). Furthermore, due to the lack of effective legal protections in the labour market, migrant workers frequently face wage arrears and insufficient compensation for occupational injuries. On the other hand, discrimination has profound negative effects on the mental health and social integration of rural youth. Many young migrant workers report feelings of inferiority, loneliness, and helplessness when confronted with discriminatory attitudes, leading to heightened psychological stress and an increased risk of depression (Li et al., 2007). This psychological burden further hampers their social skills and willingness to adapt to urban life, preventing full integration into urban society even after prolonged stays (Lu and Xia, 2016). As a result, rural youth often find themselves in an unstable 'semi-

urbanised' state (Wang, 2006; Chan, 2021; Wang, Zuo and Zhu, 2024), unable to fully belong to either rural or urban communities.

In the 2010s, the problem of the one-way 'blood transfusion' to cities faced by rural economic development was partially alleviated. This shift is partly attributed to the change in policy focus and partly to the efforts of rural youth in accumulating 'semi-urbanised' life experiences. For example, as discussed earlier, the deepening of land transfer policies allowed many migrant workers to lease their land to agricultural enterprises or large-scale growers, generating stable rental income that further supported their urban work and lifestyles. Simultaneously, some returning youth used transferred land for large-scale operations, such as developing ecological or leisure agriculture (Ding-de et al., 2018). This resource integration created new income growth opportunities for rural youth and their families. In addition, in 2017, China introduced the *Rural Revitalisation Strategy,* prioritising agricultural and rural modernisation and coordinated urban-rural development as national goals (GOV.CN, 2018). The implementation of this strategy marked a shift in policy focus from urban areas to rural regions, promoting more equitable flows of resources and factors between cities and the countryside. This shift was facilitated by measures such as agricultural subsidies, improvements to rural infrastructure, and support for innovation and entrepreneurship (Yang and Qu, 2020). These policies enabled rural youth to better adapt to urban identities or return to rural areas to pursue more diverse entrepreneurial ventures. On the other hand, some rural youth gradually narrowed the cultural gap between urban and rural areas by embracing urban culture and lifestyles. For instance, they leveraged new media platforms to showcase the unique aspects of rural culture, thereby earning greater recognition from urban residents (Tang and Zhu, 2020). The specific cultural expressions include the SMART ('shamate'杀马特) culture discussed in the next section, and the popular rural short videos on the Douyin platform that form the focus of this study.

Therefore, from the 1980s to the 2010s, China's urban-rural relationship evolved from resource differentiation to a dynamic interaction. Rural youth have consistently played a central role in this transformation. On the one hand, they provided cheap labour for China's urban modernisation and, in the process, faced many unfair treatments due to the household registration system and social and cultural prejudices. On the other hand, they have also introduced urbanised lifestyles back to rural communities, fostering the contemporary development of rural culture.

SMART culture: a rural cultural production practice

At the historical node of the 1980s to 2010s, changes in population, land resource allocation, and urbanisation-related policies directly shaped the family structure of rural youth, influenced career trajectories, and brought about profound transformations in social lifestyles. As mentioned in the previous section, rural youth have long navigated cities and villages, forming a unique 'semi-urbanised' state. This lifestyle, spanning urban and rural areas, has prompted Chinese rural youth to reconsider their identities and articulate responses to social changes through stylised cultural expressions. Among these, the rise of SMART culture provides a vivid example of this phenomenon, demonstrating the complex interaction between rural and urban culture through a significant subcultural form.

SMART culture is a subcultural phenomenon that emerged during the first decade of the 21st century, with post-90s rural youth as its main participants. This group expresses itself through external characteristics such as 'exaggerated, colourful hairstyles and cheap clothes [which] constitute the most 'visible' features of a shamate figure, with 'a final touch' of copycat cellphones' (Huang, 2020, p. 275), forming their unique cultural representation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: 'Shamate, a product of cultural poverty' (China digital times, 2013)

The background of the formation of SMART culture lies in the attempt of rural youth to shape their self-image amid urban–rural population migration. To integrate into urban life, these young people sought to imitate the image of urban residents in their minds, but this imitation was often 'used by young urbanites to mock young rural-origin migrant workers

who are assumed to ‘chase urban’ trends but constantly fail’ (Huang, 2020, p. 267). In reality, the economic income of post-90s rural youth at that time was insufficient to sustain their idealised pursuit of an urban lifestyle. This struggle is further highlighted in the discussion by Leontovich and Kotelnikova (2022):

> This is the most disliked and scorned subculture in China ridiculed in real life and on the internet. They do not want to go back to their villages but cannot find their place in the city. Shamate are young provincials without any financial or social support who, on the one hand, strive for selfrealization and want to attract attention by their appearance and, on the other, want to be accepted by the urban community (Leontovich and Kotelnikova, 2022, p. 91).

Related research further reveals the social significance of SMART culture. Scholars focus on how rural post-90s youth integrate into urban society in the process of urbanisation, how they are accepted or rejected by urban mainstream culture, and how they find themselves on the road to personal modernisation (Lin, 2015; Li, 2016; Huang, 2020). These studies not only demonstrate the complexity of SMART culture as a personalised expression, but also indirectly highlight the long-term lack of rural cultural subjectivity in rural policies. This lack of subjectivity can be traced back to the logic of the evolution of rural cultural policies after the Reform and Opening Up. Ke (2021) noted in his study:

> After the Reform and Opening Up (1982-2005), under the background of economic construction as the centre, the degree of rural openness continued to increase, the flow of urban and rural population accelerated, a large number of farmers entered the city for employment, and the pursuit of material became an important concern and was considered in the collective field. Public awareness declined rapidly. Due to the departure of the young and middle-aged labour force, the left-behind villagers are not very enthusiastic about participating in public culture. The rural public arena is gradually alienated, and the villagers have become the ‘other’ in the construction of rural public culture (p. 14).

At the same time, although the 'culture going to the countryside[11]' policy introduced in 1997 aimed to establish urban–rural cultural ties and to spread books, movies and knowledge, it also strengthens the dependence of rural culture on urban culture, reflecting the asymmetric nature of this cultural exchange.

In this context, although SMART culture faced ridicule, it may be the first attempt by rural youth since the Reform and Opening Up to seek cultural production initiative through stylised expression. In this practice, the lifestyle, creativity and identity of rural youth are intertwined in cultural production activities, illustrating the complex changes in China's urban–rural relations over the past three decades. At the same time, the popularity of SMART culture also reflects the deep-seated trends of rural policy reform and development. It is worth noting that, in 2016, when SMART culture was gradually declining, the *No. 1 Central Document* first proposed the concept of 'rural subjectivity', elevating farmers' welfare and cultural identity to policy priorities. Although this policy has no direct connection with SMART cultural practice, the digital literacy and operational experience accumulated by rural youth through participation in this subculture are expected to continue to influence the production and dissemination of contemporary digital rural cultural landscapes.

Considering the rural short videos that this study focuses on, especially their popularity on the mainstream digital platform Douyin, this phenomenon can be seen as the 'second attempt to integrate into the mainstream' by rural youths. Unlike earlier attempts around 2010, these efforts are now bolstered by the success of poverty alleviation, supportive national cultural initiatives such as the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)*, and the active role of digital platforms like Douyin's New Farmer Plan. These developments may reshape cultural production practices, providing rural youths with more flexible opportunities for personal development and diversified economic pathways.

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[11] In December 1996, the Central Propaganda Department, the Ministry of Culture and ten other ministries and commissions jointly issued the 'Notice on Carrying out the 'Three Topics Going to the Countryside' Activities of Culture, Science and Technology, and Health'. In 1997, the 'Three Topics Going to the Countryside' activities were officially implemented nationwide. Among them, the purpose of 'culture going to the countryside' is to spread advanced culture, enrich the cultural life of farmers, and promote the construction of a new socialist countryside (Meng, 2022).

In summary, drawing on the historical experiences of rural youth's mobility, family evolution, and urban-rural identity negotiation in the previous historical period, this study focuses on a new stage of identity realisation and cultural production. This study positions Douyin as a transformative medium for rural youth to assert agency and redefine their cultural narratives, while rural short videos serve as the dynamic cultural response of rural youth, situated within the broad context of contemporary Chinese digital cultural production.

Rural youths in this study

As the first chapter of this thesis, this chapter mainly sets out the historical context related to China's rural youth, with a particular focus on the changes in rural policies, economy, and cultural life during the period from the 1980s–2010s, so as to link it with the conjuncture of the rural youth cultural production after 2018 that this study focuses on. Before entering the literature review chapter, I will clarify the demographic composition of the rural youth whom I am focusing on in this study.

Youth has long been recognised internationally as a vital demographic in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of societal processes at all levels. As of 2019, the global youth population (individuals aged 15 to 24) was approximately 1.2 billion, accounting for 16% of the global population. This number is projected to reach nearly 1.4 billion around 2065 (United Nations, 2019), emphasising the growing importance of youth in global development. The United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) has emphasised youth participation through initiatives such as the *World Youth Action Program* and subsequent frameworks like the *United Nations System-Wide Youth Action Plan* (Youth-SWAP) and the United Nations Youth Strategy. These initiatives have enabled UN agencies, including the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), to enhance coordination on youth affairs, signalling a steady integration of youth-related issues into global agendas.

In China, the concept of 'youth' (qingnian 青年) began to acquire distinct social significance in the early 20th century. Historically, this shift can be attributed to the profound societal impact of youth-led movements, such as the student protests of the 1920s (Chow, 1960), and the political mobilisation of young people by the Chinese Communist Party across various social strata (Yang, 1965). Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China,

urban and rural youth emerged as key agents of socialist transformation and economic development (Yan, 1999). Their roles have consistently featured in Chinese society and policy discourses, reflecting the sustained prominence of youth in the nation's political and social activities.

Scholars' interests in rural youth (nongcunqingnian 农村青年) in China have predominantly focused on three historical periods, each reflecting significant social, political, and cultural transformations. The first period, spanning from the 1950s to the 1970s, examined the lives of rural youth under the influence of socialist campaigns and the 'educated youth' movement, which shaped their roles in collectivist labour and ideological reformation. The second period, corresponding to the early years of Reform and Opening Up, explored the impact of land reforms and other policy measures on rural youth, with a particular focus on resource allocation and individual development opportunities. The third period, around the 2010s, centred on the rise of rural-to-urban migration and the emergence of the SMART subculture, highlighting the shifting identities and aspirations of rural youth against a backdrop of rapid modernisation and urbanisation.

Since 2018, however, rural youth in China have entered a new historical phase. Politically, the economic capabilities and social mobility of rural youth have assumed critical importance in realising the *Rural Revitalisation Strategy* and the broader goal of common prosperity. These shifts underscore the strategic role of rural youth in national development agendas. Culturally, the proliferation of new media platforms has revolutionised how rural youth express themselves and engage in social participation, fostering new modes of interaction and cultural production. Amid these changes, the social structure of rural youth and the dynamics of rural cultural production have undergone significant reconfiguration. This evolving landscape highlights the importance of examining the platformisation of rural youth's cultural production, particularly their agency in mediating between the traditional values and social norms of older generations and the ongoing digitalisation of rural life.

To better define contemporary rural youth, I considered three dimensions: (1) age structure as described in relevant United Nations and Chinese policy documents; (2) rural youth's participation in China's policy environment and social life; and (3) regulatory mechanisms governing users on digital platforms, such as short video apps. Firstly, from an international perspective, there is no unified definition of 'youth' among UN organisations. For instance, UNESCO defines youth as individuals aged 15 to 24 for statistical purposes, but notes that

this definition ‘is not universal’, as youth experiences vary significantly across regions (UNESCO, n.d). In China, the age range for youth also varies. The National Bureau of Statistics defines youth as those aged 15 to 34, while the Communist Youth League defines the range as 14 to 28 years. Moreover, China’s first youth development plan, the *Mid-to Long-term Youth Development Plan (2016–2024)*, defines youth as individuals aged 14 to 35. These differences demonstrate that China’s definition of youth is not static but evolves with societal development.

Secondly, the structural transformation of China’s rural youth is closely tied to broader social changes. As noted by Lian (2021), ‘the structural changes within the youth population are not only synchronised with but also more intense and frequent than those affecting other social groups’ (p. 12). Over the past few decades, rural China has undergone significant social reforms, including changes in land ownership, the rural migrant worker wave, the proliferation of ICTs, urban-rural structural shifts, and the expansion of education. These changes have directly influenced the composition and behavioural patterns of rural youth. While some continue to engage in traditional agricultural labour, a significant portion has pursued alternative career paths that do not rely solely on agriculture. Observations of rural content creators on short video platforms reveal a wide and ambiguous age range among contributors. Considering these social transformations and individual differences, this study adopts 35 years as the upper age limit for rural youth, as proposed in the *Mid- to Long-term Youth Development Plan (2016–2024)*, with flexibility to include those who have migrated to cities for work, education, or business and possess digital literacy or training in media technologies. These individuals may have accumulated personal capital such as skills, funds, and social networks.

Thirdly, for younger rural youth, the study also considers digital platform regulatory mechanisms. For example, in 2021, the Douyin platform introduced a youth protection mechanism that automatically placed users under 14 years old in ‘Youth Mode’ (Douyinstastic, 2021). This mode restricts login duration and limits monetisation opportunities. As a result, rural users under 14 are effectively excluded from the platform’s core user base. Therefore, this study sets 14 years as the minimum age for rural youth, aligning with policy contexts and practical digital platform usage scenarios.

In summary, the research targets of this study are RYPs aged 14 to 35, who hold rural household registration and actively participate in cultural production on digital platforms.

This group segmentation reflects the complex interplay of policy, societal transformation, and digital platforms, providing a robust framework for understanding their evolving roles in RYPs' production practice on Douyin.

Conclusion

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the transformations that shaped the lives of rural youth in China from the 1980s to the 2010s, focusing on the intertwined dynamics of family, land, and identity. These historical shifts illuminate the socio-economic and cultural foundations that underpin the practices of RYPs in the digital era.

The evolution of rural family structures during this period marked a critical turning point for rural youth. Traditional large, multi-generational households transitioned into smaller, nuclear families, driven by the combined impact of policies such as the *One Child Policy* and the economic Reform and Opening Up policies. These changes disrupted traditional familial roles, weakening the economic and spiritual bonds that once defined rural family life. Yet, rural youth responded to these shifts by asserting individual agency, balancing modern aspirations with traditional values such as filial piety and responsibility. This adaptive resilience of rural youth provided a blueprint for intergenerational cooperation and cultural storytelling, now reflected in RYPs' short video production, where narratives of filial piety and family responsibility remain central themes, as explored in later chapters.

Land, as the cornerstone of rural economic life, also played a transformative role in shaping rural youths' experiences during this era. The Household Responsibility System of the 1980s catalysed agricultural productivity but created long-term constraints by fixing land allocation per household, even as family sizes changed. These resource limitations, coupled with the mechanisation of agriculture, compelled rural youth to seek economic independence by migrating to cities. This migration was further accelerated by the widening income gap between urban and rural areas. However, urban migration often entailed socio-cultural and institutional barriers, including the discriminatory effects of the household registration (hukou) system, which marginalised rural youth in cities. These challenges, though significant, also fostered a 'semi-urbanised' identity among rural youth, characterised by a blend of rural and urban influences and the ability to navigate dual socio-economic worlds. This duality—both a challenge and a resource—has continued to shape RYPs' capacity to

act as cultural intermediaries in the digital era, bridging rural and urban audiences through their content.

Culturally, the emergence of SMART (shamate) culture in the early 2000s provides a vivid example of rural youths' efforts to assert agency and navigate their evolving identities. This subculture, while often ridiculed, reflected rural youths' attempts to engage with urban norms while expressing their individuality. The struggle for cultural legitimacy within SMART culture highlights the historical absence of rural cultural subjectivity in national policies and underscores the resilience of rural youth in claiming space for self-expression. The legacy of SMART culture—its stylised performance of identity and its negotiation with urban culture—resonates in the practices of contemporary RYPs. Today, rural youth build on these earlier experiences, leveraging digital platforms such as Douyin to assert cultural agency, create narratives of modern rural life, and redefine public perceptions of rurality.

Building on this historical context, this study focuses on RYPs aged 14 to 35 who actively participate in cultural production on digital platforms. This demographic reflects the cumulative impact of decades of socio-economic and policy transformations. For instance, the structural changes in rural families and land use during the 1980s to 2010s not only redefined the economic roles of rural youths but also nurtured their mobility, adaptability, and creative potential. These qualities are evident in the ways RYPs navigate contemporary digital platforms, blending traditional values with modern storytelling techniques. The study also accounts for the effects of digital platform regulations, such as Douyin's youth protection mechanisms, which shape the participation and age range of rural content creators. By highlighting the intersection of policy, social transformation, and digital platform dynamics, this study positions RYPs as critical agents of cultural production and societal change in rural China.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

The works discussed in this chapter are drawn from various fields of literature, including new media, culture, cultural production, rural studies and others. They primarily encompass aspects of the arts and humanities, as well as society and politics. Given the limited literature specifically on rural short videos on the Douyin platform and the cultural production processes undertaken by RYPs, it is necessary to draw upon existing research in related fields to construct a robust theoretical framework. Considering the influence of these studies on the methodology and subsequent analytical perspective of this research, this chapter is organised into four sections: situating Douyin platform; understanding rural cultural production on short video platforms; youth culture studies; and issues of digital cultural production. The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of the academic literature within which this study is situated and the associated intellectual work. Literature relevant to the overall debate of this study is reviewed here, while literature contributing to the discussion of specific findings is examined in greater detail in subsequent chapters.

Situating Douyin Platform

The rise of Douyin

The aim of this research is to critically analyse popular rural short videos on Douyin and the cultural production practices of rural youth producers within the context of national rural policy changes. To fully address the research questions, it is therefore essential to situate Douyin within the broader Chinese social media landscape and to examine its historical development, technological affordances, and institutional positioning. This section provides a detailed contextualisation of Douyin, outlining its origins, growth trajectory, and the rationale for its selection as a research site, before considering its significance as a platform for mediating content, culture, and policy.

Short videos are a distinct form of digital media enabled by non-linear, internet-distributed content. Unlike linear television, which relies on scheduled programming, short videos are brief, informal, and often user-generated, allowing consumption and production to occur in fragmented, individualised ways (Zhao, 2019; Fletcher and Nielsen, 2017). Users capture

and share moments from daily life, while algorithmic recommendation systems classify content according to individual preferences rather than predetermined genres (Picard, 2014). This format offers a flexible, participatory mode of media engagement that emphasises immediacy, personalisation, and interactivity. The subject of this study—Douyin short videos—constitutes a specialised subset of this format, distinguished by the platform's mobile-first design, music integration, and algorithmic recommendation system (Kaye, et al., 2022). Typically under three minutes in length, they are produced using Douyin's suite of creative features—filters, effects, templates, and music libraries—that facilitate high levels of user creativity and replication (Schellewald, 2021). Understanding these generic and technological characteristics is essential to contextualising Douyin's distinctive affordances and operational logics.

Douyin was launched by ByteDance in 2016. As of March 2025, Douyin's monthly active users numbered 1.001 billion, far exceeding the second-ranked Kuaishou's 573 million, thereby establishing its dominance in China's short-video industry (QuestMobile, 2025). Its emergence is particularly striking in the context of the highly concentrated Chinese digital ecosystem dominated by the so-called BAT triopoly—Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent (Su, 2022). As a late entrant, Douyin's success has been attributed to ByteDance's innovative 'app-factory' operational model (Su, 2024, p. 35): a centrally coordinated corporate structure that organises teams by functional specialisation rather than product lines. This model facilitated the rapid development, testing, and, where necessary, closure of multiple algorithm-driven applications. Within its first six months of expansion, ByteDance launched and discontinued approximately fifteen apps—an iterative, data-driven process that refined the artificial intelligence underpinning its recommendation systems (Meng, 2021). Such a strategy exemplifies a deliberate, experimental approach to platform development, enabling ByteDance to compete effectively with established incumbents.

Although Douyin originated as a modest internal project with fewer than twenty employees (Shen, 2022), its subsequent viral growth surpassed expectations. The platform's organisational structure, often described as a 'central console system' (Jun, 2020), has, however, attracted scholarly critique. Analysts have highlighted structural vulnerabilities, including challenges in corporate separation and the concentration of decision-making authority at senior management levels (Zhou et al., 2021). More broadly, Douyin exemplifies the platform economy's prioritisation of algorithmic governance over creator autonomy.

This prioritisation manifests in opaque content distribution mechanisms and asymmetrical power relations between the platform and its creative workforce (Hesmondhalgh and Lotz, 2020). Accordingly, Douyin serves as a paradigmatic case study of the potentials and tensions inherent in China's digital media ecosystem, offering both unprecedented commercial reach and significant socio-technical constraints.

The platform's distinctiveness is further underscored by its orientation towards mobile, music-centric content (Zhang, 2022). While a limited version of Douyin is accessible via web browsers, most content-creation functionalities are mobile-exclusive. Music is integrated into the platform as a central creative element rather than a mere accompaniment—a design feature that differentiates Douyin from both short-video and music-streaming competitors. For instance, the main viewing interface foregrounds a music album-cover button that visually signals playback (see Figure 2), linking directly to the platform's integrated music library. In the video-creation interface, the 'Select Music' button allows users to browse, preview, and edit tracks across multiple categories (see Figure 3), as well as import their own audio. This design foregrounds the role of music in shaping content, encouraging creative replication, and facilitating the viral dissemination of audiovisual memes. Such affordances were central to Douyin's early growth strategy, leveraging trending music and fashionable video forms to establish the platform's identity as 'trendy', 'cool', and highly replicable (Kaye, et al., 2022).

The importance of situating Douyin historically and technologically is also evident in its recommendation system, which forms the foundation of its content distribution. Built on the architecture of ByteDance's news app Toutiao, it employs neural-network algorithms to predict user behaviour. According to Douyin's published principles, its mechanism establishes statistical correlations between user behaviour and content features rather than interpreting semantics. Its simplified formula—recommendation priority = user behaviour probability prediction × behaviour value weight—incorporates actions such as clicks, views, likes, and reposts, weighted by metrics including completion rate and favourites (Douyin Security and Trust Centre, 2025). This behavioural model ranks content by predicted engagement rather than preset tags or popularity, theoretically granting lesser-known creators exposure (Anderson, 2020). Yet, as Su (2022) notes, collaborations with MCN organisations and prominent influencers often result in professionally produced content receiving greater algorithmic prioritisation. This illustrates the tension between algorithmic

impartiality and commercialised promotion. For this study, interrogating this tension is essential to understanding how rural youth producers strategically navigate and negotiate their visibility within the platform's evolving ecosystem.

Platform Affordances: Social, Creative, and Commercial

In social media studies, the term 'affordance' refers to the possibilities for action that are embedded in technological design and shaped by user perception and socio-cultural context (Bucher and Helmond, 2018). Born for small screens and designed for consumption during fragmented timeslots, Douyin incorporates a range of features in its interface and short-video creation tools to facilitate a seamless user experience and lower barriers to participation. While the present study does not employ the 'Walkthrough Method' as a formal data collection strategy, its conceptual framework offers a useful heuristic for understanding Douyin's interface and design logics. As Light, Burgess, and Duguay (2016) propose, the 'Walkthrough Method' emphasises the analysis of app environments as sociotechnical artefacts, drawing attention to their design visions, interface arrangements, and modes of governance. Adopting this perspective conceptually, this section considers Douyin's interface features and affordances as key mediators of user engagement and creative practice.

Douyin's main viewing interface design is central to its user experience and to its function as a mechanism of algorithmic governance. The vertically oriented, full-screen display presents one video at a time (see figure 2), thereby concentrating user attention and enabling the collection of detailed behavioural data—swipe speed, viewing duration, likes, comments, and replays—that feed directly into the recommendation system (Bucher, 2017). Interaction buttons positioned on the right-hand side of the screen—such as 'like', 'comment', 'favourite', and 'share'—serve as immediate points of engagement while doubling as instruments for data extraction. Meanwhile, the lower navigation bar connects users to five core functions—'Home', 'Friends', 'Create', 'Inbox', and 'Profile'—establishing a seamless circuit between consumption, production, and social communication. This design exemplifies what van Dijck et al. (2018) describe as the 'datafication' of everyday life, wherein every micro-interaction is both a communicative act and a form of behavioural measurement.

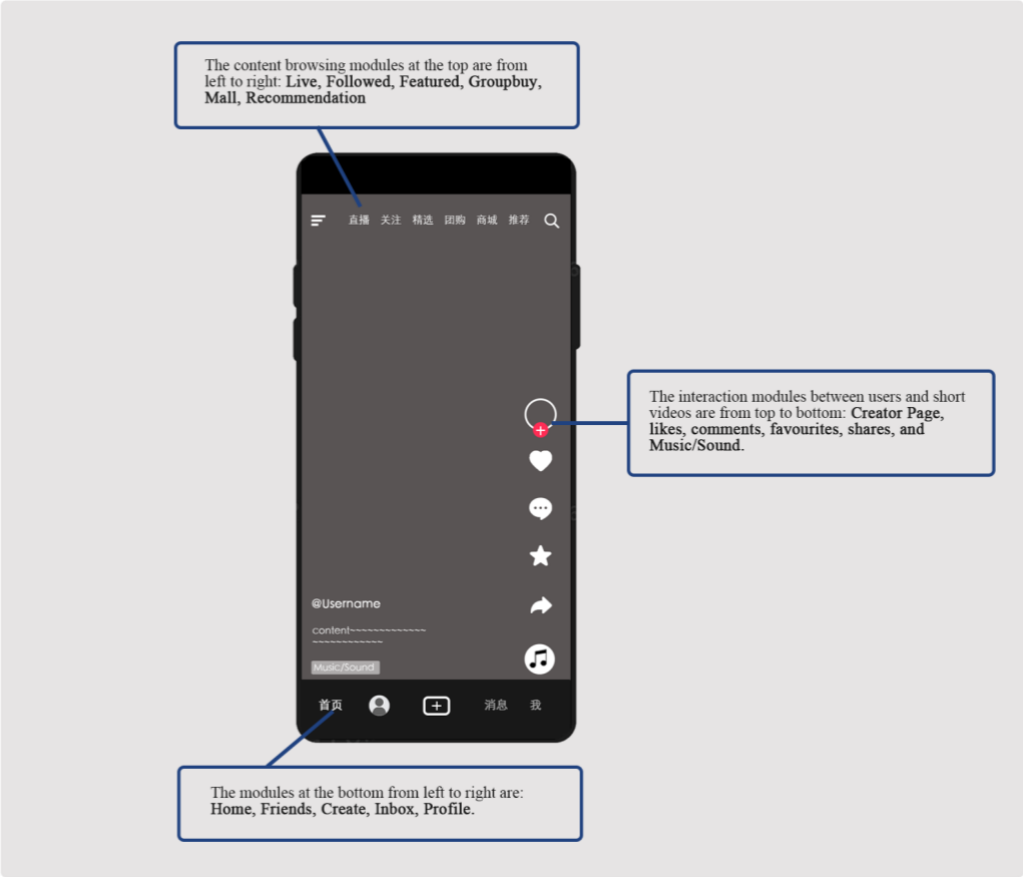

Figure 2: Douyin main viewing interface. (designed by author)

The platform's creative affordances reinforce these dynamics through an integrated suite of editing tools and templates that make short-video production highly accessible. Within the 'Create' interface, users can record clips, apply beautification filters, adjust playback speed, add text overlays, and select background music from an extensive, platform-curated library.

Two key components of Douyin's creative infrastructure are atomised creative tools and structured creative templates. Atomised creative tools constitute the platform's modular and composable design features, enabling users to create short videos from independent, non-narrative building blocks. These tools are accessible via the video creation interface (see figure 3), including functions such as flash, filters, countdowns, beautification effects, and speed adjustments. The 'Select Music' feature also forms part of this toolkit, allowing users to incorporate soundtracks from Douyin's licensed music library or to upload original audio. This integration of musical cues with visual transitions enables users to produce emotionally resonant narratives with limited technical skill (Zhang, 2022), while simultaneously

supporting the viral circulation of audio-driven trends. This modular structure affords considerable creative flexibility, facilitating the spontaneous combination and recombination of visual and auditory elements. As Schellewald (2021) notes in relation to TikTok, such affordances foster diverse communicative genres (comedic, documentary, explanatory and interactive etc.), anchoring creativity within a framework of replicable design.

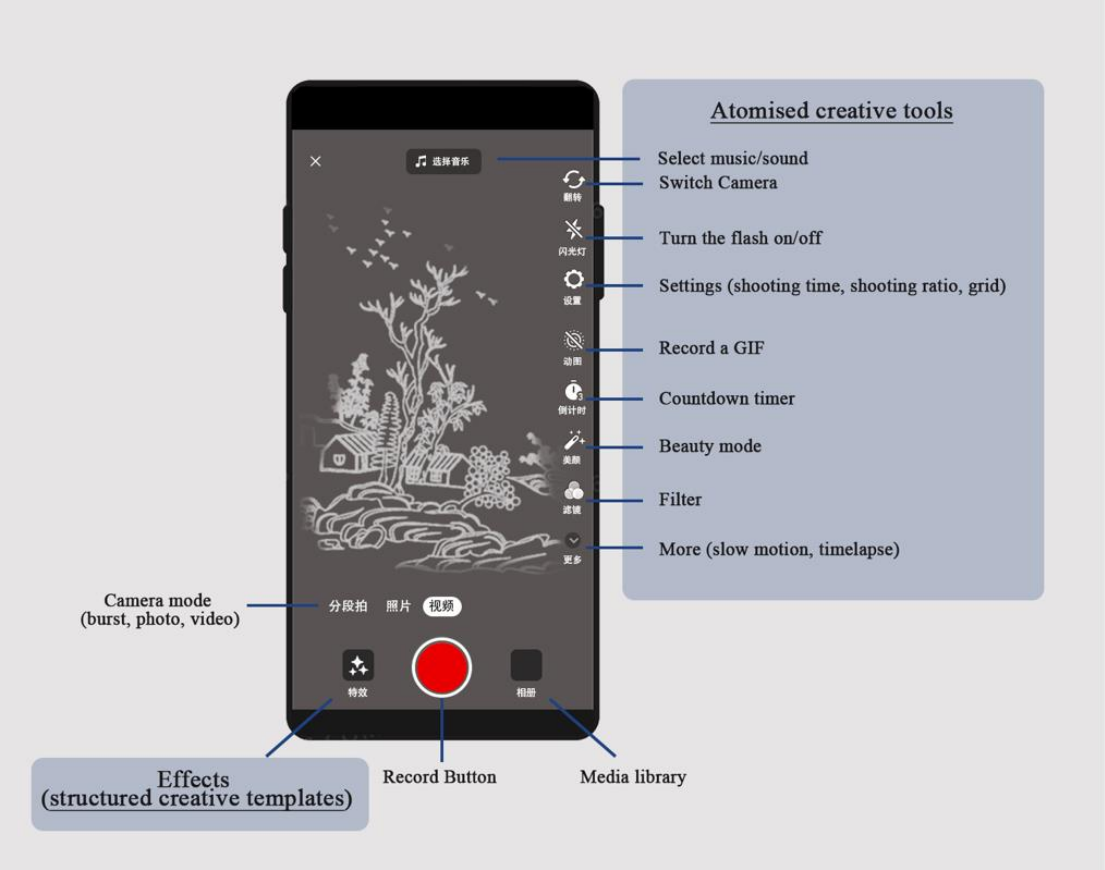

Figure 3: Douyin video creation interface (designed by author).

Structured creative templates, by contrast, package multiple atomised tools into pre-configured workflows that automate aspects of content production. Accessible via the platform's 'effects' interface (figure 4), these templates provide integrated sets of visual and auditory elements across categories such as 'Food', 'Landscapes', 'Cosplay', 'Beauty', and 'Pets', as well as participatory formats like 'AI Play', 'Challenge', and 'Test'. Similar to the templated elements on Instagram that encourage replication and mimesis (Leaver et al., 2020), Douyin's templates algorithmically standardise aesthetics and narrative form, streamlining participation while subtly directing user behaviour. These design logics encourage creators to reproduce platform-endorsed styles and join large-scale cycles of imitation and replication (Zulli and Zulli, 2020), thereby transforming everyday creativity into quantifiable engagement within Douyin's broader attention economy.

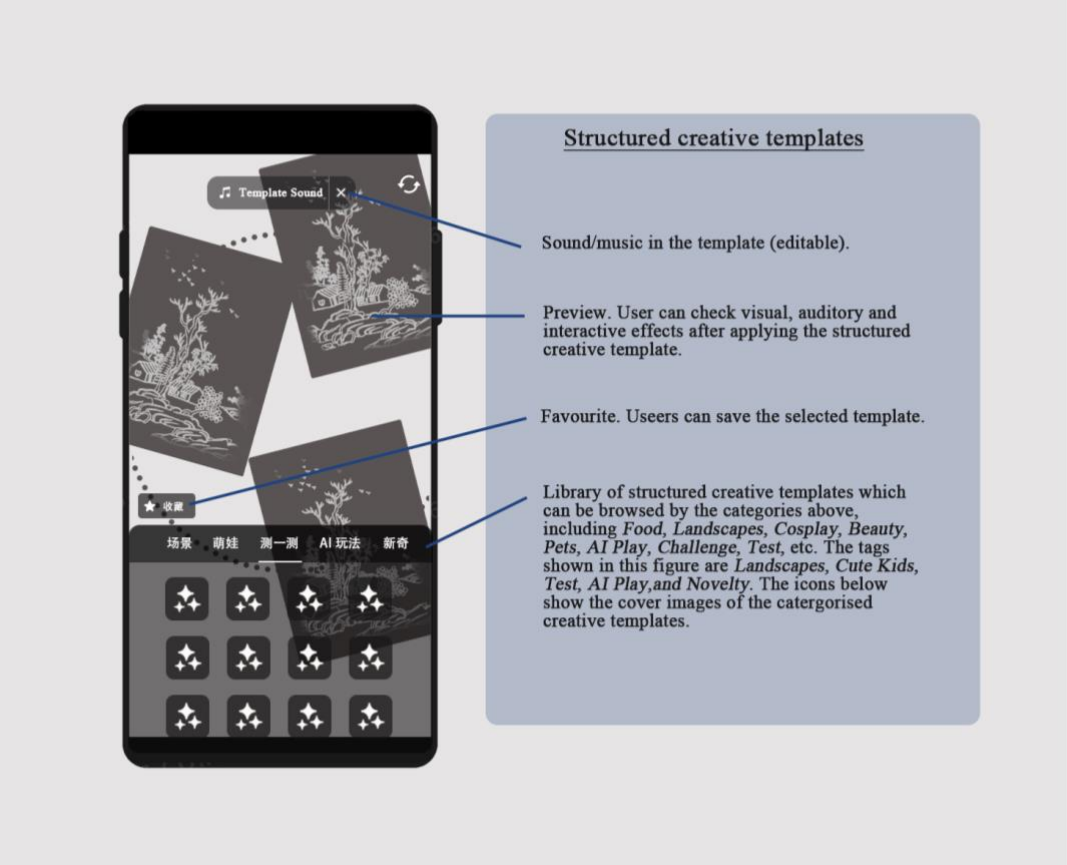

Figure 4: Douyin structured creative templates page. (Designed by author)

In addition, e-commercialisation has become another structural feature of Douyin, linking content creation, audience engagement, and transactional activities into a single platform ecosystem, demonstrating how commercial logic is systematically integrated into technological affordances and operational design (He et al., 2022). Douyin's commercial affordances are deeply embedded in its platform design, facilitating a robust e-commerce ecosystem alongside short-video content. The platform integrates direct shopping functions such as Douyin Shop and links to major e-commerce sites like Tmall and Taobao, enabling seamless 'one-click' transactions for users, creators, and advertisers (Wang et al., 2021). Tools such as Ocean Map and Ocean Engine standardise brand deals between influencers and advertisers, providing marketing support, traffic allocation, and account-level pricing that professionalise content production and monetisation (Cai et al., 2022). Short videos thus become both entertainment and commercial vehicles, with creators encouraged to align content with trending topics or marketable products while retaining creative autonomy.

From a cultural production perspective, Douyin's interface both facilitates and regulates participation. It simplifies creative engagement, allowing even inexperienced users to record, edit, and publish videos with ease, while simultaneously embedding them in a regime of

quantifiable evaluation, where metrics such as likes, comments, and shares determine visibility and monetisation. As algorithms transform creativity into computational participation (Bishop, 2019), producers' practices become shaped by predictive engagement with opaque recommendation systems rather than by expressive intent. This dynamic gives rise to what Myers West (2018) calls 'folk theories', informal user interpretations of how visibility functions. Exploring the interaction experiences of rural producers with algorithms is therefore an important part of this study (relevant research findings are in Chapter 6), as it helps to understand the contradictory positions of young rural producers in production practices and to reveal the interactive relationship between their productive power and the institutional power of attention management by data-driven digital platforms.

These affordances and algorithmic dynamics shape the everyday creative decisions of rural youth producers, as explored in Chapters 5 and 6. While its tools ostensibly democratise creativity, they also bind users to an attention economy that rewards conformity and predictability. For rural producers, participation may entail the continual negotiation between authenticity and optimisation, and between experimentation and standardisation. Douyin's affordances thus operate as both enablers of creative expression and instruments of cultural discipline, mediating how rural life is performed and perceived within China's platform economy.

Douyin as a Site of Platformised Rural Cultural Production

Building on the preceding review of Douyin's functions and affordances, this study identifies Douyin as the most critical site for examining the platformisation of rural youth cultural production in China. Compared with other short-video platforms, such as Kuaishou, Douyin provides a more concentrated and structured environment in which to observe how commercial logics, algorithmic governance, and state ideology intersect to shape rural creative practices. Its significance lies in the complex interweaving of platform business strategies, national policies, and the broader platform ecosystem, which makes it uniquely positioned for analysing how rural cultural production is mediated, regulated, and commodified within China's digital economy.

Douyin's business strategy reveals a systematic shaping of rural content, driven by the imperatives of expanding lower-tier markets and implementing centralised traffic regulation.

This approach enables rural content to circulate beyond its native interest communities and gain greater exposure among wider digital publics. Had this study focused on Kuaishou instead, the findings would likely emphasise decentralised community interaction rather than the managed visibility characteristic of Douyin's platform logic. In Su's (2024) comparative study of Douyin and Kuaishou, while Kuaishou's early focus on lower-tier markets fostered a 'naturalised' model of participation based on strong community engagement, Douyin privileges professionally produced, high-quality content through algorithmic weighting. The platform collaborates extensively with MCN organisations and celebrity creators, actively steering its content ecosystem towards professionalisation and 'platformisation' (pp. 73–76). This orientation is most evident in Douyin's official 'New Farmer Plan', the central focus of this research. Through targeted traffic support, identity verification, and commercial integration, the platform has established a complete economic circuit for rural users, encompassing content creation, audience circulation, and e-commerce conversion (see Chapters 4 and 6). Rural users can find the event entrance and easily participate by searching for the 'New Farmer Plan 2022' tag or browsing the event promotion page on the Douyin platform (see figure 5). As discussed earlier, Douyin's algorithmic model — based on 'user behaviour probability × behaviour value weight' — grants the platform precise control over content dissemination. This governance mechanism allows content aligned with its commercial and ideological objectives to transcend geographical boundaries and achieve extensive visibility, while simultaneously reinforcing the platform's structural dominance over the rural content ecosystem.

Figure 5: Douyin New Farmer Plan 2022 activity entrance and official promotional page. (Designed by author)

At the same time, with the largest number of users and a more compliant, high-quality content base, Douyin has high political legitimacy. Its official initiatives, such as the 'New Farmer Plan', exemplify the strategic convergence of platform capital and state policy. With 'Rural Revitalisation' established as a central state initiative, Douyin's market penetration strategy closely aligns with national rural digital development goals. By designing campaigns that resonate with official discourse, the platform mitigates regulatory risks. In contrast, Kuaishou's regulatory risks appear higher. Its 'naturalised', decentralised operating model enables content often described as 'vulgar, shallow, lowbrow, and absurd' (Liu, 2020)

to circulate freely within its strong community networks. Over time, this openness has allowed unhealthy, criminal, and violent content to proliferate (Ling, 2021). Following regulatory penalties in 2018 for the viral spread of inappropriate material, Kuaishou gradually lost its leading position in the industry (Su, 2024, p. 73). By contrast, Douyin's more centralised traffic distribution model integrates national policy within its operational logic, demonstrating a deliberate and managed approach to compliance. This synergy is evident in its traffic distribution mechanisms: through user interface design, participation guidelines, official events, and creative tools, Douyin embeds a form of top-down cultural regulation (Yang and Lee, 2022), ensuring that state-endorsed narratives of the rural image are prioritised across the platform. Importantly, this alignment does not entail unilateral state control.

As Chen, Keya and Zeng (2021) observe, 'the affordances of popular Chinese social media are not necessarily designed by the state; instead, the state also needs to learn the logics of radically evolved digital media to engage with platforms to achieve political ends' (p. 113). This points to a reciprocal model of Douyin's rural content governance: while Douyin adjusts its operations to meet state expectations, the Chinese government simultaneously adapts its strategies to exploit the participatory affordances of short-video platforms. A comparative analysis of China's rural policies and Douyin's 'New Farmer Plan' is therefore necessary to explore how the platform functions both as a vehicle for policy implementation and as a space for policy learning. The results of this analysis are discussed in Chapter 4.

The convergence of these forces has produced Douyin's distinctive platform ecosystem. Through its centralised algorithmic architecture and precise traffic allocation, Douyin orchestrates an efficient mechanism for the production and dissemination of rural cultural content. Rural young producers are thus situated within a system that requires continual adaptation to the logics of content orientation, editing, and algorithmic visibility (Su, 2024, p. 75). Their creative practices provide a valuable lens through which to examine the interdependent relationships among platform, state, and user. The case of Douyin transcends the simplistic binary of 'vulgarity' versus 'beauty' in rural representation, revealing how rural youth culture is systematically integrated into a platformised process that fuses commercial imperatives with ideological governance. In this sense, Douyin operates simultaneously as an economic infrastructure, a cultural intermediary, and a site of ongoing negotiation over the meanings of rurality in contemporary China.

Understanding Rural Youth on Short Video Platforms

This section reviews scholarship on the emergence of rural digital cultural production in China, with particular attention to how short-video platforms have reconfigured the representation and circulation of rural life. Existing studies indicate that rural content on these platforms constitutes a dynamic cultural scene through which rural youth articulate identity, negotiate modernity, and engage in broader networks of communication and exchange. Scholars such as Fang (2021) and Peng (2015) have examined how short-video platforms operate as interactive 'scenes' that facilitate emotional expression and social connection, while others, including Cao and Cao (2021), emphasise the relational and fluid nature of rural–urban communication enabled by these technologies. Building on this body of work, subsequent research has explored both the democratising potential of platform-based creativity (Lin and de Kloet, 2019; Sarwatay, Lee and Kaye, 2023) and the tensions between user agency, platform affordances, and state regulation within China's platformised cultural economy. Collectively, these studies provide a conceptual foundation for analysing how Douyin mediates rural youth's creative practices, identity formation, and participation in China's digitally networked society.

Rural digital cultural production

The rural content constructed on short-video platforms can be interpreted as a cultural scene reflecting the evolving dynamics of rural life. Short-video social media consumption provides rural youth with an important 'scene' through which to showcase their personal lives and communicate with strangers online. Fang's (2021) research analyses rural scenes on short-video media and applies scene theory to examine how rural youth meet their own needs through virtual interactive environments. She draws on Meyrowitz's (1985) concept of how electronic media alter social environments by blurring traditional distinctions between public and private spaces, integrating Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework and McLuhan's (1964) media theory. Additionally, she identifies five key factors—mobile devices, social media, sensors, data, and positioning systems—that shape how individuals perceive media contexts. Her analysis explores the performative and functional value of rural life scenarios in digital spaces and proposes that the construction of such scenes enables emotional communication with other users, evoking resonance with rural life among viewers. Similarly, Peng (2015) highlights the importance of scene-based services in the mobile era:

> The significance of scenes in the mobile era is greatly strengthened. The essence of mobile communication is scene-based services, and the concept of scenes can help create spatial atmosphere and virtual space in the process of mobile communication (p. 25).

If Fang and Peng's research has regarded rural short videos as a digital scene and has begun to integrate platform affordances and interactive perspectives, then in Cao and Cao's (2021) study—which examines how digital platforms shape new interactions between urban and rural areas—rural short videos emerge as a key network from a relational perspective. Although Cao and Cao use the term 'landscape', this concept is, in fact, closely aligned with the previously discussed notion of 'scene', as both emphasise the shaping of cultural content through multi-party relationships and interactions. Within this interactive process, what circulates is the 'flow' of information:

> Space brings together practices that coexist at the same time through the operation of fluidity. Flow dominates the expression of the process of economic, political and symbolic life, thereby challenging the traditional linear order (Cao and Cao, 2021, p. 24).

This shift from a linear understanding of urban–rural communication to one of dynamic information flow demonstrates how rural short videos disrupt binary divisions, blending traditional rural life with modern digital culture. This integration process actively shapes the current flow of information in rural short videos. Such a breakdown of binary cognition is useful and employing the communication network generated by this urban–rural integration (McDonald, 2016) offers an effective approach to addressing urban–rural communication challenges in China's digital age. However, from the perspective of platform production, the shaping of rural short videos is not limited to urban–rural interactions but extends to rural producers and all other users. Even when incorporating an urban perspective, such as the contrast between 'slow life' and 'fast life' (Cao and Cao, 2021), restricting analysis to urban–rural contexts may not fully capture the complexity of rural short-video production. A more useful concept in the Chinese context may be that of the 'public' or 'popular', as this encompasses the platform's public sphere and the social norms guided by policy. International research further supports this perspective; for example, research from India

demonstrate how rural information flows on TikTok breaks traditional geographical boundaries and challenge generalised representations of online rural discourse.

> TikTok in India is aspirational for ordinary people for it has provided a more democratic place for self-expression and (sometimes) lightweight activism among rural, semi-urban, and/or vernacular creators via its easy and intuitive interface (Sarwatay, Lee and Kaye, 2023, p. 52).

Abidin (2020) identifies this process as 'demoticisation', comparing TikTok's inclusive culture with platforms such as Instagram and YouTube. This feature is mirrored on Douyin in China because, although the software differs somewhat in business operations and page design, its basic functions are largely similar. It is reasonable to attribute the spread of short-video production to rural areas in China to a comparable process of demoticisation. However, Turner's (2010) concept of the 'demotic turn' requires critical consideration within the Chinese context: what is considered demotic in China? When exploring how Chinese rural culture transcends social class barriers and spreads at the national public level, this is not simply a practice of technology platforms, platform popular culture, or urban culture being introduced into rural areas. Rather, this study focuses on how rural culture transcends regional and inherent cultural boundaries to enter the public sphere—how rural cultural practices become accessible and widely comprehensible. Therefore, when TikTok is described as 'an indispensable platform in cultural production' (Verma, 2021, p. 159), within which anyone from any social class or lifestyle can express themselves and produce creative practices, there is no need to emphasise a conflict between elite culture and grassroots culture. The central concern of this study is how rural cultural practices are integrated into the popular cultural field on Douyin, reflecting the platform's role in shaping social culture and 'popularity' within short-video cultural production.

Second, relevant research shows that the platformisation of cultural production for Chinese rural creators has created opportunities for personal development. In addition to promoting rural youth self-expression and social interaction, platforms encourage them to engage in cultural production via social media. This opportunity to become creative content producers provides rural youth with a new pathway for personal development (Duffy, 2016). Lin and de Kloet (2019) refer to rural youth as an 'unlikely creative class' and discuss the potential for this group to become creative workers online. Their research is based on the short-video

media platform Kuaishou. Launched in 2012, Kuaishou has gained significant popularity among Chinese migrant youth from rural areas, who use the platform as a means of achieving socio-economic mobility by producing content that resonates with a large fan base (Zhou and Liu, 2021). The platform enables these users to develop local creativity through self-learning and to monetise creative content via e-commerce (Lin and de Kloet, 2019, p. 4). Before Douyin's rise to popularity, Chinese rural youth were widely active on Kuaishou. It should be noted that the SMART culture mentioned in Chapter 1 was also widely disseminated on Kuaishou during this period.

On the other hand, Lin and de Kloet argue that the platform-based content production of rural groups goes beyond a purely 'digital labour' model, as conceptualised by Ritzer and Jurgenson (2010). Nor is this a simple issue of 'exploitation and empowerment' of producers (Fuchs, 2010; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010; Tan et al., 2020). Rural youth build connections and intimacy with their audiences in content creation and, on this basis, channel their emotions into action. Referring to Hardt and Negri's (2004) research on early social media platforms, emotions such as 'relaxation, pleasure, stimulation, [and] happiness' are automatically generated when specific physical states and patterns of thought are expressed on the platform. This suggests that, through the production and management of such everyday emotions, rural youth can achieve entertainment and relaxation, negotiate their labour relations, and subsequently develop into accomplished content creators.

As stated in Lin and de Kloet's (2019) research, the possibility of rural groups becoming a platform-based creative class may derive from three factors: local creativity, the affordances of short-video platforms, and monetisation opportunities. However, when considering these issues within the globally discussed 'platformisation' perspective, the intervention of Chinese state power is a critical factor, as platform-based cultural production operates within China's governance context.

> Under the policy agenda of 'Internet+' and 'Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation,' the state's aspiration of economic restructuring drives but also shapes the platformisation of Chinese cultural production. The state–corporate relationship is largely complicated due to the state's dual concern with economic restructuring and cultural regulation and social stability. [This] we argue, distinguishes the platformisation of cultural production in contemporary China

> from that in the West and constitutes a third dimension to what Nieborg and Poell (2018, p. 2) summarise as the 'contingency' of platform cultural production (Lin and de Kloet, 2019, p. 4).

This third dimension is state power. Within the framework of Nieborg and Poell (2018), 'platform dependency' and 'contingent commodities' are two key dimensions that constitute contingency. The former reflects the dominant power of the platform, which 'allow[s] content developers to systematically track and profile the activities and preferences of billions of users.' The latter reflects the production and circulation circuit of cultural products on the platform, namely, 'malleable, modular in design, and informed by datafied user feedback, open to constant revision and recirculation' (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p. 2). State power is primarily manifested in the complex relationship between the state and enterprises, arising from the state's dual focus on economic restructuring and cultural regulation (Lin and de Kloet, 2019, p. 4). This relationship constitutes the policy basis enabling rural groups to become a creative class on the platform (Lin, 2019).

National policy and ideology are fundamental considerations that cannot be ignored in the production of short-video culture in China. Specifically, platforms operating within China are subject to scrutiny and must cultivate a culture of compliance. The Cyberspace Administration of China (CAC), under the direct leadership of President Xi Jinping, stipulates: 'abide by the law, adhere to the correct values, and help disseminate Core Socialist Values and cultivate a positive and healthy online culture' (CAC, 2017). In addition to requiring that the production and dissemination of all content comply with the law and official ideology, regulations also clarify employee management, user registration, and penalties for violations.

Looking back at the connection between short-video platforms and political discourse, TikTok, the international version of Douyin, has faced considerable challenges in the international market since its launch in 2017. Whether it is the ban in the United States or the recent ban in India, these events demonstrate that the platform is highly susceptible to national geopolitics and the influence of digital sovereignty discourse (Kumar and Thussu, 2023). On the other hand, they also illustrate TikTok's considerable capacity as a media intermediary to influence social culture. Unlike the international version, Douyin in mainland China has developed steadily since its launch in 2016 and does not appear to have

faced similar international challenges. Research on TikTok in India (Kumar and Thussu, 2023) indicates that following the ban, the Indian government promptly supported local platforms as alternatives to assert control over the short-video media market. The purpose of this intervention was to maintain national digital sovereignty (p. 1590) and ensure data localisation (p. 1592). Although this study does not focus on the international version or related geopolitical issues, it is appropriate to regard Douyin as China's current mainstream digital platform, noting that it operates under Chinese digital sovereignty and maintains data security, separate from the political and national discourse challenges observed on TikTok.

Chen, Kaye, and Zeng (2021) introduce the concept of 'playful patriotism' on Douyin, revealing how platforms balance commercial interests and compliance with national governance:

> Instead of an overt propagandist strategy, Douyin's construction of playful patriotism could be considered ByteDance's survival tactic and the camouflage of the actual purpose of the platform. As a commercial enterprise, Bytedance does not intend to challenge state regulators. It focuses on playful content to generate profit (ibid., p. 113).

This complex relationship demonstrates that Douyin's platform governance intertwines commercial value with state requirements, promoting patriotism while ensuring social stability. According to Zhao (2008), the Chinese party-state has adjusted its political, economic, and ideological influence to accommodate market reforms while simultaneously preserving its control over the media industry. This approach guarantees that media commercialization remains aligned with state-driven patriotism and reinforces the legitimacy of the ruling regime. Zhao also highlights that, while private capital and cultural entrepreneurs contribute to mass entertainment, they must operate within a state-regulated framework that prioritises government objectives (p. 167). This reflects the challenges faced by media companies such as ByteDance, which must balance market-driven success with strict adherence to state policies emphasising social stability and ideological alignment. From this perspective, rural short videos, as part of Douyin's content ecosystem, are inevitably shaped by these regulatory frameworks. Rural youth producers (RYPs), therefore, navigate not only creative and economic opportunities but also state-imposed cultural norms

and policies. These factors influence the subjectivity and cultural forms of RYPs as creative workers.

These literatures reviewed provide several key insights that form the foundation of this study on Douyin short videos and Chinese rural youth cultural production, focusing on how digital platforms shape cultural narratives and interactions. The concept of short videos as digital cultural scenes illustrates how they create emotional spaces for rural youth to share their lives, inspiring this study to explore Douyin's role in providing visibility and fostering cultural connections. The platformisation of rural cultural production highlights how platforms break traditional urban–rural binaries, encouraging further exploration of rural youth participation in mainstream digital content. Additionally, the democratising potential of platforms such as Douyin empowers marginalised rural voices, prompting this study to examine how rural cultural practices overcome geographic and social barriers to enter the public sphere. Finally, the significant influence of state policies on platform-based cultural production leads this study to investigate how rural content creators navigate regulatory frameworks to maintain both creative agency and compliance. These insights collectively shape the thesis focus on the nuanced relationship between Douyin's platform structure, rural youth cultural production, and the broader sociopolitical context of digital culture in China.

'Public sphere' and digital platform

> The new media are not 'media' in the received sense. They radically alter the pattern of communication that has been dominant in the public sphere until now by empowering all potential users in principle to become independent and equally entitled authors (Habermas, 2023, p. 27).

Habermas's latest discussion on the impact of new media platforms on the structure of the public sphere explains how 'new' media use technology to provide users with opportunities for communication and production within virtual networks. In particular, the characteristic of being 'not responsible' for their own 'programming' enables unpredictable discourse to spread rapidly and profoundly alter public communication itself. While these unpredictable utterances are spontaneously selected, 'they encounter each other as participants who are in principle equal and self-responsible' (Habermas, 2023, p. 28). However, a large part of this

process is unregulated, or lacks professionalised filters. This iconic new media communication model and its unregulated exchange have, to a certain extent, led to 'fragmented national publics' (Schlesinger, 2024, p. 5).

In the above-mentioned discussion by Habermas on the impact of new media platforms on the structure of the public sphere, he emphasises a new mode of generating and communicating public opinions that lacks professional supervision. My understanding of this model is as follows: on digital platforms that claim to promote free expression, the invisible filtering mechanisms that collect and distribute spontaneously selected content make it difficult for those responsible for shaping public opinion to fully understand the process, leading to a lack of professionalism and responsible review. Consequently, trends towards fragmentation and polarisation 'counteract the integrating power of the communication context of the nationally centred public spheres established by the press, radio, and television' (Habermas, 2023, p. 29). The normative ideals surrounding this political public sphere are facing unique challenges. Countries such as those in Europe and the United Kingdom are engaged in heated discussions on new regulatory models for new media platforms, striving to explore the direction of civil society in this new media environment, as analysed by Schlesinger (2024) in his critique of current regulatory practice and public sphere theory in the UK.

Returning to the issue in China, as an important player in the geopolitical landscape, the internet operates according to goals set by the Communist Party of China, focusing on achieving national autonomy in technology, cyberspace, and the cyber environment. Regulatory plans that will impact the above objectives are also being developed. However, it should be noted that, unlike the European tradition, which focuses on bourgeois society, there are limitations to thinking about Chinese issues purely in terms of the 'public sphere' model. The so-called 'public sphere' in China is more often considered a 'third realm' (Huang, 1993) or 'third sphere' (Huang, 2019). The specific reasons are as follows:

> [The third sphere is] neither simply the state's formal system nor simply society's informal system, but rather their interactions and the distinctive patterns and logics therein. Those interactive relationships in the third sphere […] have been the more pervasive because of the Chinese tradition of centralized minimalism—of highly concentrated central power combined with a vast small

> peasant economy, which resulted in strong tendencies toward minimalist governance both to guard against parcelization of centralized imperial power and to maintain governance at minimal cost to the state. (Huang, 2019, p. 357)

The perspective of the 'third sphere', arising from this background, provides a more appropriate explanation for the relationship between China's state, society, and people since unification. In this third sphere are characteristics 'made up of special characteristics that come from the political-economic and political-legal tradition born of the combining of a big centralised imperial state with a small peasant economy' (Huang, 2019, p. 383). For instance, as mentioned in the first chapter, during the Reform and Opening-Up period, China's market economy and private enterprises largely emerged with the support of state machinery and officials. Therefore, they cannot be completely separated from the state; rather, they are better understood as part of the system, products of interaction with the market. They exhibit both the influence of national guidance plans and the role of semi-autonomous, market-oriented profit-seeking entities. During this period, rural collective and grassroots administrative leadership cannot simply be regarded as an integral part of the national bureaucracy. The interaction between external state cadres appointed by superiors and community cadres embedded in strong rural networks cannot be ignored. This situation, which is neither purely national nor purely social, represents the long-standing operational state of Chinese society.

Building on this, the concept of the 'digital public rural sphere' in this research represents a contemporary extension of the 'third sphere', where central power and the small-scale peasant economy are intertwined (Huang, 2019), into the online environment. It denotes the semi-public, digitally mediated space in which rural youth actively create, circulate, and negotiate cultural and social discourse related to rural life. Characterised by algorithmically mediated visibility and interactive audience engagement (likes, comments, shares, etc.), this space enables rural participants to perform, validate, and reimagine rural identity while negotiating local social norms, platform affordances, and regulatory oversight. The digital public rural sphere thus offers a lens through which to understand the hybrid interactions between state guidance, rural communities, and platform infrastructures.

Therefore, if the core appeal of Habermas's public sphere theory is to bring public issues into discursive consideration to uphold the important position of culture in human life in a

cultural society, his latest discussion highlights the impact of current digital platforms on this process. In the context of this study, the instructive point that needs to be retained is the discursive strategy in the formation of rural public topics. As emphasised by Hall (1997, p. 44), discourse 'governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others.' Specifically, attention should be focused on how discourse that refers to the same object, shares the same style and supports 'a common institutional, administrative or political drift', as well as the meaning and meaningful practice (Foucault, 1972), operates under rural cultural practice on the Douyin platform. In this context, discourse has been expanded into short video elements (titles, text, audio, video, etc.), while gatekeepers have been transformed into non-human infrastructures such as algorithms, and likes, favourites, or reposts have become simple forms of short video discourse through which opinions are expressed. In this case, what discursive strategies do RYPs adopt to construct the 'public' rural life on the Douyin platform? This may provide a social and political perspective on the short video cultural style and a clue to explore the tripartite power relationship between the nation, RYPs, and the platform. Similarly, Chinese scholars' perspective on the 'third realm' is based on careful observation of China's reality. Therefore, in the analysis of rural short video production, they also examine China's local rural social relations, especially in rural areas.

To sum up, 'new' media platforms fundamentally reshape the traditional public sphere by empowering users as independent content creators, fostering unpredictable and spontaneous discourse. Habermas (2023) emphasises that while this decentralised communication model democratises content creation, it also produces fragmentation and a lack of professional oversight, challenging the integrative power of traditional media and prompting debates over new regulatory approaches in Europe and the UK. In China, the public sphere differs markedly from Western models due to the historical and political predominance of the state. Huang's (2019) 'third sphere' perspective offers a more suitable framework for understanding interactions between state, society, and individuals, reflecting a hybrid space shaped by both centralised governance and localised social dynamics, particularly in the context of China's market economy and rural administration.

As a practice of translating public sphere theory into the context of contemporary Chinese platform-based cultural production, the concept of the 'digital public rural sphere' provides

a lens for analysing how rural youth navigate and negotiate social and cultural discourse online. It highlights how platforms such as Douyin mediate interactions between local social norms, state guidance, and platform infrastructures, offering insight into the formation of collective representations of rural life. This perspective directs attention to observable features of short-video production, including narrative strategies, stylistic choices, editing techniques, and the use of text, audio, or visual overlays, while guiding thematic and discourse analysis of rhetorical strategies, depictions of rural identity, and negotiations of social and cultural values. By foregrounding the interplay between rural actors, platform affordances, and broader social structures, the concept provides a theoretical tool for interpreting patterns in digitally mediated rural cultural production.

Within this framework, Douyin serves as a critical site for examining the construction and regulation of digital discourse. Drawing on Hall's (1997) discourse theory, this study considers how algorithmic infrastructures replace traditional gatekeepers and how user interactions function as forms of discourse. Exploring the strategies adopted by rural youth content creators offers insight into the social and political dynamics shaping representations of rural culture, emphasising the need for a nuanced approach that accounts for local social relations and community norms. This perspective thus provides a critical foundation for analysing rural short video production and the broader cultural and regulatory landscape of China's digital media environment.

Studies of Youth Culture

Through the review of the relationship between rural digital culture in China and digital platforms, and by taking into account the interventionist power of national politics, theoretical insights on the discourse relationship between producers, platforms, and the state in the context of rural short video production are established. At this stage, considering that the strong willingness and enthusiasm for media consumption shown by China's rural youth groups are closely tied to their specific regional attributes and social status, it is essential to understand the cultural practices and forms of the RYPs group in this context. Therefore, it is necessary to review the literature on youth culture and subculture studies related to youth groups to gain insight into how cultural styles are formed and disseminated on platforms. This section will begin with the development of youth culture worldwide and explore critical research on youth culture from the era of consumption explosion to the present. It will then,

in combination with China's national conditions, compare traditional subculture theory and post-subculture theory to frame the development of China's youth subculture and the factors affecting the generation and dissemination of cultural forms.

Youth culture and consumerism

In the 1940s, Talcott Parsons coined the term 'youth culture' to refer to youth's unique values and behaviours. In contrast to the generally increased focus at the time on youth crime and the expanding youth market in business, Parsons argued positively about the role of youth culture in the transition from childhood to adulthood. He proposed that youth culture has a sensitive function in shifting from specific family childhood identities to marital and professional identities (Parsons, 1942, p. 614). It can therefore be understood that youth culture has a unique guiding role in the identity transition from child to adult. In addition, there are also studies taking a positive view of the development of youth culture (Coleman, 1961, p. 9). Through careful intervention, youth cultures can be directed to have social value while maintaining their unique value system. All the above points illustrate how external influences can impact life trajectories during the shaping of youth culture. However, in China, the guiding role of youth culture mentioned by Parsons has been partially weakened because of the 'cultural firewall[12]' (de Kloet and Fung, 2016, p. 9). In their book *Youth Culture in China*, de Kloet and Fung (2016) argue that, unlike in Western countries, political concepts, family concepts, and education are three systems with which youth culture must contend in China (p. 9). While they argue this cultural control is not infallible, Chinese youth do not grow and behave unfettered. Specifically, in the early stages of adolescence, external forces such as other cultures that could influence the values of Chinese youth are weakened. After the age of 18, when many Chinese young people enter university, this 'firewall' no longer has a strong restrictive effect, and young people begin to encounter anti-hegemonic values (p. 10). Nevertheless, the cultural firewall that existed previously has undoubtedly

[12] The term cultural firewall refers to the combination of regulatory, ideological, and technological mechanisms that shape and restrict the circulation of cultural content within China's digital ecosystem. While it parallels the notion of the 'Great Firewall' that governs internet access and information flow, the cultural firewall extends beyond technical censorship to encompass the selective promotion, regulation, and adaptation of cultural narratives in line with state-defined values and policy objectives (see de Kloet and Fung, 2016).

delayed Chinese youth's engagement with other cultures. The critique of the above points in this study is not intended to challenge China's cultural firewall system but rather to provide a macro-level context for reviewing the development of youth culture and subculture theories and their manifestations in China, as discussed in the following sections.

US research on youth culture and consumerism after World War II links the consumption boom and rapidly growing youth market brought about by economic development to the rise of scholarly criticism of 'mass culture'. Pells (1985) argues that the rise of mass culture is an inevitable consequence of the prosperity of mass marketing rather than of consumerism per se. Popular culture is also thought to be eroding young people's ability to exercise self-choice. Like Riesman's (1950, p. 361) critique of the pop music industry, popular music is thought to shape the preferences of young people to suit the market. Quart (2003) offers a more pessimistic view in youth culture research in the early twenty-first century: youth has been commodified. In Quart's analysis, commercial enterprise disrupts the creativity and enthusiasm of young people. The views of these scholars indicate that, under the wave of consumerism around the world at that time, young people were coerced by consumerism and became easy targets and victims of enterprise development. In China, the emergence of the wave of Chinese consumerism is thought to have begun in 1988, as the implementation of China's Reform and Opening Up around 1978 laid the foundation for the rise of consumerism about a decade later. It was during this critical period that the rural family structure began to change, and a wave of migrant workers emerged. From this period onwards, the consumption choices of Chinese youth expanded, as described by Clark (2012) in his book on Chinese youth culture:

> Spare time activities, including entertainment and sports, clothes, shopping, and even finding a job, were open to individual selection from a spectrum of possibilities. The consumer revolution was taking root (p. 198).

At this stage, the rise of mass culture can also be observed in the development of Chinese youth culture. Companies targeted Chinese youth during this period. For example, certain television programmes and celebrities capitalised on young people's consumption impulses, and this process of entanglement also helped to shape the consumption habits of Chinese youth (Clark, 2012).

However, in the study of Chinese youth culture, young people cannot be regarded solely as passive consumers. Although the scholars mentioned above have criticised mass culture, youth cultural participation under consumerism has long been considered to possess unique significance and value (Williams, 1961). Eminent cultural theorist Raymond Williams argues that culture should be understood as a way of life, encompassing both its progressive expression in art and learning, and the meanings and values embedded in everyday life (1961, p. 57). More recent scholarship describes the concept of youth participation in consumption as:

> Living in the now, pleasure-seeking, product-hungry, embodying the new global society where social inclusion was to be granted through purchasing power (Savage, 2007, p. 18).

Combining the above two conceptual descriptions, mass culture is also an important practice through which young people express their own way of life, seek meaning, and participate in entertainment. Hesmondhalgh's (2013) study of popular music presents a similar view, suggesting that music should not be strictly classified as one of the essential objects of popular culture research. For example, avant-garde classical music is associated with higher social prestige, whereas pop music is often deemed synonymous with mediocrity. In his research, music serves as a lens through which all cultural products can be understood, as it articulates both self and collective identity by linking private emotion with public experience. In the same field, according to Andrews' (1992) research on Chinese popular music, early 1980s Chinese society was filled with disapproval of popular music and concerns about its impact on youth. By 1988, however, at a national conference in China, a speaker suggested that pop music could bring joy and vitality to young people. From this period onwards, pop music gradually gained acceptance, and its positive effects were recognised as extending beyond the musical form itself. On the one hand, Andrews' research highlights the positive significance of Chinese youth consuming popular music. On the other hand, it demonstrates that the Party and government, as constructors of the Chinese cultural environment (one of the three dimensions of cultural control discussed above), maintained a confident, optimistic attitude towards the cultural consumption of young people during this period. This optimism also supported an open policy for the rapid development of Chinese media and encouraged Chinese youth to express and consume creative cultural content across various media platforms. Under the impetus of this open policy, the expression of Chinese youth culture

became closely linked to consumerism, aligning with the country's market-oriented economic development and the changing lifestyles of Chinese youth under cultural collisions. In this context, rural migrant workers—a rural youth cohort largely born in the 1980s and 1990s—participated in the practice of Chinese youth cultural production, largely due to their exposure to urban life. This specific practice is exemplified by the SMART culture.

In respect of my own research, scholars' explorations of youth culture—from Talcott Parsons' early concept to contemporary understandings—provide a powerful framework for analysing the dynamics of rural short video production on platforms such as TikTok. Historically, youth culture has been viewed as both a transitional phase and an important social force, shaped by a variety of external factors, including politics, family, and market forces. In China, the concept of a 'cultural firewall' and the Reform and Opening Up Policy illustrate the unique challenges and constraints faced by rural youth culture within a highly regulated environment. However, changes in rural socio-cultural conditions and youth lifestyles also highlight possible adaptive strategies adopted by rural youth to negotiate these constraints. Additionally, the development of concepts of consumerism and popular culture after the Second World War further emphasises the key role of media in shaping and reflecting youth culture. The interplay between consumerism and youth culture not only commodifies youth but also provides a platform for creative expression and identity formation. This dual role is particularly evident in the Chinese context, where scholars' attention to rural youth cultural production is consistently linked to the socio-cultural context of the rise of consumer culture in the late twentieth century and the influence of media power.

Circuit of youth culture

As the practice of Chinese youth culture since the Reform and Opening Up combines cultural expression and consumerism, it is necessary to review the role of the media in this process, particularly in promoting the circulation of Chinese youth culture. In the twenty-first century, with the rapid development of the internet, young people's media consumption and the production of cultural content have begun to reflect a specific set of consumer attitudes and perspectives. The high level of media dissemination can amplify these consumption attitudes and perspectives among youth (Osgerby, 2020, p. 206). Therefore, exploring the expression and significance of youth culture in the media has become a central focus of youth culture research. To address this theoretical gap, cultural researchers have proposed the concept of

'cultural circuits.' In Johnson's (1997) interpretation, attention must be paid to the three-stage cycle of production, textualisation, and reception to fully understand the significance of cultural content in the media. These three stages are interactive and interdependent, forming a 'cultural circuit' (p. 83). Johnson emphasises that it is insufficient to focus solely on the motivations of users and the textual content of media; the organisation of content production and audience feedback are also critical aspects to consider.

Du Gay et al. (1997) extended the concept of the 'cultural circuit', proposing a more specific five-part framework for analysing cultural phenomena: production, identity formation, representation, consumption, and regulation. D'Acci (2004) adopted a similar research framework, arguing that cultural meaning emerges from the interplay of four key stages: the moment of production, the cultural artefact, the reception process, and the broader socio-historical context. A recent study by Osgerby (2020) on youth culture and media relations applies this 'cultural circuit' approach to the relationship between youth culture and media. Osgerby conceptualises this interaction as a 'youth culture circuit' (p. 209). Although manifested in different ways, these conceptualisations of 'cultural circuits' reinforce the comprehensive study of cultural content on media platforms and the interaction between its various stages.

The theoretical construct of 'cultural circuits' provides a useful lens for examining the production, dissemination, and reception of cultural content. Applied to the Douyin platform, this concept emphasises the importance of understanding not only the content produced by rural youth but also the feedback loops created by audience interactions. The highly interactive nature of Douyin means that audience comments and engagements significantly shape the production and evolution of short videos, creating a dynamic circuit of cultural exchange. This approach is particularly instructive for exploring rural short videos on the Douyin platform. According to Meng and Leung (2021, p. 11), Douyin's interactivity enhances communication between video producers and viewers, thereby influencing user engagement and satisfaction. Consequently, the platform may strengthen or transform the entire process of youth cultural production, from the moment of production, through the cultural products themselves, to the reception process (D'Acci, 2004). The addition of algorithms and recommendation mechanisms disrupts traditional cultural boundaries, profoundly affecting production, dissemination, and the representation of cultural products. Nevertheless, the production and consumption of rural short video culture on Douyin

remains cyclical. From this perspective, the relationship between producers, media content, and platform mechanisms—and their impact on ongoing cultural production—constitutes the key focus for analysing the complete process of rural short video creation.

When examining the dynamic and cyclical process of production, representation, and reception on Douyin, it is useful to consider how the platform's interactive and algorithm-driven features influence cultural production by rural youth and transform the traditional boundaries of youth cultural expression. As rural youth become both producers and consumers of cultural content on Douyin, their practices reflect an ongoing negotiation between local identities and broader socio-cultural influences. This study builds on these insights by exploring the unique dynamics of rural short video production, focusing on how Douyin's mechanisms facilitate a continuous feedback loop that shapes and reshapes rural youth culture in contemporary China.

Chinese Youth Subculture Practice

Building on youth culture scholarship and the cultural circuit framework, this section integrates traditional subcultural theory from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) with post-subcultural perspectives, which have been particularly influential in media and cultural studies. This theoretical synthesis enriches the analysis of rural short videos as expressions of cultural production, identity construction, and mediated interaction within platform-based cultural scenes.

Exploring the style of subculture

In terms of expression, ritual resistance is the main style of traditional subculture studies. After World War II, the British working class and the bourgeoisie exhibited profound contradictions. CCCS scholars argue that the cultural symbols and stylistic characteristics produced by the working class in dress, behaviour, and popular culture carried meanings of resistance to the cultural hegemony of the bourgeoisie (Cohen, 1980). Traditional subculture theory is the dominant paradigm created by CCCS scholars, taking the British working class and the subcultures they produced as the research object. Within this paradigm, factors such as age, class, ethnicity, geography, and shared interests form unique symbolic and material cultures (Clarke et al., 1976). These factors are integrated into a fundamental concept: style. Hebdige (1979) interpreted style semiologically, arguing that subcultural styles arise from

the ‘bricolage’ of existing objects or symbols and the continuous symbolic expression of a subcultural group formed through the combination of different cultural elements (‘homology’). The importance of subcultural style is well illustrated through his analysis of punk rock as ‘semiotic guerrilla warfare’ (p. 105), which transforms everyday media cultural products into new, threatening, and subversive content. This concept of style, based on ritual resistance, forms the theoretical foundation and core focus of CCCS scholars’ research on youth subcultures.

Chinese cultural scholars generally acknowledge the continuing relevance of style as a theoretical concept, yet they question whether ritualised resistance adequately accounts for the diverse behaviours of youth in subcultural production. Hu (2012) suggests that post-industrial subcultures in China represent a fusion of styles, dissolving the divisions of traditional subcultural structures and reducing the significance of resistance. There is also potential for interaction and transformation with popular culture. Likewise, Zhao (2019) contends that mainstream media and commercial capital shape and transform Chinese youth subcultures, gradually eroding their oppositional functions. Zhao illustrates this with the following example:

> In the past two years, modern street dance, hip-hop music, and other ‘trendy’ elements have become popular in China’s youth subculture scene. These elements originate from African American hip-hop culture, which carries political demands for civil rights, as well as values centered on individual freedom, anti-traditionalism, and resistance to authority. With an inherently counter-mainstream cultural resistance, hip-hop culture was initially a form of cultural defiance. However, in a consumerist society, these once-resistant youth subcultures have been transformed by commercial capital into various hip-hop-style fashion brands, which have gained immense popularity among young people (p. 1995).

This viewpoint aligns with early Western critiques of CCCS subculture theory. Subcultures, constructed through media, serve as a key resource for young people to develop self-identity. They evolve continuously and cyclically within media contexts, rather than following the linear trajectory proposed by CCCS (Thornton, 1995, p. 161). Hu (2012) highlights a point particularly relevant to this study: China’s rural short video culture has the potential to

integrate with mainstream culture and society. Chen (2021) supports this argument in his research on the *Tuwei* culture[13], showing that Tuwei videos break cognitive barriers between urban and rural residents through self-deprecation and performative practices, bringing rural culture into the gaze of mainstream society. While this media form still encounters tensions with mainstream culture, Tuwei videos have supplanted ritualised resistance, functioning instead as a medium through which society engages in the dialectical process of structural integration (p. 225). Zhao (2019) maintains that Tuwei culture is primarily motivated by joyful self-entertainment rather than class-based or political resistance. Although these videos display traditional subcultural elements such as collage and homology, the pursuit of pleasure appears to be their dominant developmental trajectory.

For this study, it would be inappropriate to attribute the entertainment aspects of commercial consumption and media discourse exchange solely to rural short video culture, as Douyin's rural short videos differ markedly from the Smart style or rustic style in their expressions, such as depictions of 'new farmers' or the 'beautiful countryside'. A particularly valuable point is their role as a cultural medium in the integration of China's social structure, as this relates not only to the platformisation of Chinese cultural production in recent years, but also to the broader developmental trajectory of the nation and society. If China's mainstream media and commercial capital can transform youth subcultural styles, then the countryside—as the birthplace of China's traditional culture and production practices—under the combined influence of evolving rural policies and Douyin's business model, reflects both the position of rural society within the mainstream social structure and changes in rural cultural subjectivity. The forms of expression adopted by rural youth thus constitute a central focus of this study.

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[13] Tuwei culture (土味文化) is a Chinese internet slang term referring to a subculture that embraces a kitschy, exaggerated, and often humourous aesthetic associated with rural or grassroots expressions. The term 'tuwei' literally translates to 'earthy taste' and is often used to describe internet videos, music, fashion, and memes that reflect a mix of nostalgia, parody, and local cultural identity. While initially perceived as unsophisticated, Tuwei culture has gained popularity on social media platforms, influencing digital entertainment and youth subcultures in China (Zhou and Liu, 2021).

Construction of Subculture

As noted above, CCCS studies of youth subculture emphasise class-centred power relations, alongside a resistance-based structure theory in which 'power' is central, as exemplified by the Teddy Boys and skinheads examined by Cohen (1972). Cohen argued that subcultures could compensate for social elements disrupted in the parent culture by combining specific class symbols to resolve existing contradictions and conflicts (Cohen, 1972, p. 23). This suggests that youth culture is more than a contemporary fashion phenomenon; it constitutes a significant social force capable of providing meaning and facilitating social change. Accordingly, CCCS views the power struggle implied by class as a primary factor in shaping youth subcultures. Even analyses of Chinese youth subcultural groups must take account of the applicability of class perspectives. In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of China formally proposed the cessation of class struggle. Since the onset of Reform and Opening Up, the class concept derived from Marxist political economy has gradually diminished (Li, 2019), particularly as rural youth began migrating to urban areas (as discussed in previous chapters). As the principal participants in youth subculture production and consumption, these groups display complex class characteristics (Zhao, 2019). Similarly, Ma, Yang, and Wu (2018) describe the current class status of Chinese farmers as tending towards 'semi-proletarian':

> Because they own land (means of production) in rural areas and may also own some personal property (homestead housing, production tools, etc.), but they may not only engage in agricultural production activities in rural areas, but also exist as hired workers in cities (p. 76).

These dynamics are shaped by disparities in family resources, regional development, and socio-economic opportunity structures, which influence how rural youth construct their livelihoods and class identities across rural and urban contexts. Consequently, the class position of rural groups can be understood as structurally hybrid, a condition in which individuals simultaneously occupy roles associated with both agricultural producers and urban wage labourers. For the purposes of this study, it is therefore crucial to examine how these hybrid socio-economic identities are represented in short videos, and how they influence patterns of rural cultural production.

In this context, the concept of ‘scene’ in post-subcultural theory offers a useful framework for understanding the construction of Chinese youth subcultures. Straw (1991) was the first to theorise the concept, noting that scenes often transcend specific locations, reflect particular relational states between populations and social groups, and form unique alliances through distinct musical styles (p. 379). The concept is not limited to musical subcultures; its flexibility allows it to encompass a wider range of cultural practices (Straw, 2001; Bennett and Peterson, 2004). Bennett and Peterson further subdivide scenes into three types: regional, cross-regional, and virtual. This conceptualisation overcomes traditional limitations based on class, race, and gender (Griffin, 2011). Glass (2012) emphasises that scenes are not passive spaces but are actively constructed through interaction, transformation, and boundary management. He argues that subcultural groups establish, modify, and regulate scene spaces, embedding them with symbolic meaning, which shapes members’ identities and power relations (pp. 696–699). Consequently, the space in which a scene occurs facilitates the expression and negotiation of identities, power, and cultural practices.

The ‘scene’ perspective plays a distinctive role in understanding the construction of rural youth subcultures in China. As noted in earlier discussions of platform-based production, rural youth actively engage in cultural production on digital platforms, empowered by technology. In his study of Tuwei culture, Chen (2021) highlights how rural youths represent original rural landscapes and cultural symbols through short video media. This practice not only captures the attention of urban youth but also facilitates rural youths’ processes of self-construction and identity formation. Similarly, Zhao (2019) argues that such constructions of rural scenes evoke social meanings associated with Chinese rural spaces, particularly notions of rural life and family attachment.

Fang’s (2021) research, discussed in the previous section, highlights the critical role of scene construction in the rapid dissemination of rural short videos. She argues that creating scenes that meet the demands of popularisation not only helps rural short videos gain more followers but also facilitates the spread of rural culture on the platform. In their study, Scoble and Israel (2013) identify five key forces—mobile devices, social media, data, sensors, and location—within the mobile media context, which serve as a theoretical model for analysing the potential of scene theory in disseminating youth culture on platforms such as Douyin. However, these five forces are primarily applied in the context of business strategies under contemporary short video and cloud technologies, ‘which means almost every business will

have to adjust the course to include context in their strategies, just as they had to do at the advent of other forces of dramatic change, like personal computing or the web' (Scoble and Israel, 2013, p. 15). While this model helps explain how rural youth interact with media, its top-down focus limits detailed understanding of cultural manifestations. Accordingly, although Fang examined the construction of rural scenes on Douyin, her study lacks an in-depth exploration of the elements and specific forms of these scenes. This research seeks to address this gap by analysing the construction of rural scenes in short-form videos, thereby complementing existing work on the style and significance of rural youth subcultures on Douyin.

Interaction of subculture

Traditional subcultural groups, as theorised by the CCCS, gathered members with similar styles and values into relatively closed communities defined by resistance and segregation. The CCCS perspective views subcultural resistance as a process of identity formation, a way for individuals to negotiate their self-identity in opposition to dominant cultural norms. As Hu (2006) notes, the CCCS framework treats distinctive styles as symbolic boundaries that divide 'insiders' from 'outsiders' (p. 90).

However, with the development of media technologies and the increasingly fluid nature of social interaction, the rigid structural boundaries described by CCCS scholars have become less relevant. French sociologist Michel Maffesoli (1996, p.76) introduced the concept of the 'tribe' to describe new, loosely organised social formations characterised by shared emotions, lifestyles, and consumption practices rather than stable class or ideological positions. These tribes are temporary, affective communities formed around shared tastes and experiences, reflecting a shift towards more individualised and fluid identities in late modernity.

Building on Maffesoli's ideas, Bennett (1999) proposed the notion of the 'neo-tribe' to reinterpret youth culture in a post-subcultural context. For Bennett, 'neo-tribes' capture the fragmented, transitory, and networked nature of youth cultural participation in the age of globalisation and digital media. Unlike the class-based subcultures theorised by the CCCS, neo-tribes are not defined by social resistance or coherent ideology, but by affective belonging and flexible participation in shared scenes.

In the Chinese context, Zhao (2019) argues that the emergence of such 'neo-tribes' reflects a transformation in youth subcultures, from individual identity construction to the collective identification of subcultural communities. Moreover, under China's state-regulated media environment and the growing acceptance of subcultural practices by mainstream culture, these subcultural 'tribes' are gradually shifting from oppositional to integrative formations, blending resistance, creativity, and conformity within a hybrid cultural landscape.

Specifically, the 'neo-tribe' in Chinese youth subculture may be reflected in the movement of subcultures and mainstream culture from competition and resistance toward coordinated development (Chen, 2016). Chen's statistical analysis of a cultural programme on Bilibili (China's mobile video platform) shows that a 236-minute performance incorporated a range of subcultures, including two-dimensional singing and dancing, autotune remix, and animation, spanning production to broadcast. The programme involved collaboration between professionals from diverse fields and ordinary netizens. Audience comments also formed an integral component, contributing to nearly 40 million views and approximately 1.4 million comments. Chen argues that this cross-temporal, cross-domain, and cross-community sharing and collaboration dismantles the boundaries of previously fixed communities. Consequently, this collaborative model can be regarded as a key form of cultural participation for Chinese youth in the post-subculture era.

From a rural perspective, Fang (2021) notes that interactions among rural youth, platforms, and viewers have attracted the attention of mainstream social groups, with non-rural users exchanging viewing experiences through commenting and sharing functions. Although rural short videos are produced by rural youth, their audience is no longer limited to a specific rural group; instead, it has become a more open and mobile community shaped by shared interests. Mainstream users can also provide production feedback through comments and participate in cultural dissemination by sharing videos, aligning with the concept of a 'neo-tribe'. Consequently, to understand the development of rural Chinese short videos as a subculture, this 'neo-tribe'-like interaction and its influence on the ongoing production of short video content will be examined.

This particular genre of film offers valuable insight into how the notion of 'insider/outsider' is reinforced through content. A review of the literature on the 'Westerns' reveals that many classic films and television series are set in the expansive frontier, often regarded as the

United States' 'only mythical organisation'. These works—whether depicting tales of cowboys and Native Americans or illustrating the spirit of individualism in a harsh environment (Tompkins, 1992)—largely reflect the authentic locations, spaces, and living conditions of the American West. Through their soundtracks and didactic storylines, they evoke nostalgia for a past era or an imagined experience never personally encountered (Alexander, 2012). The connection of these narratives to race, gender, class, human rights, natural resource ownership, and identity construction (Handley and Lewis, 2004) is particularly significant. Such elements are compelling because, while films and viewing experiences may offer an escape from reality, these settings allow audiences to immerse themselves in a constructed, imaginary Western world, eliciting profound emotions, identity reflection, and memory formation (Denzin, 2008).

Reflecting on my research, Chinese rural areas exhibit distinct and enduring characteristics shaped by millennia of agricultural practices and moral traditions. These elements are deeply embedded in traditional rural lifestyles, Chinese family values, and the foundations of classical culture. Just as Hollywood Westerns are popular cultural products with clearly defined regional, ethnic, historical, and moral discourses, rural short video content similarly has the potential to reach cross-cultural audiences. The extensive user base and high engagement on the Douyin platform provide significant opportunities for interaction and dissemination. Consequently, when considering rural short videos as popular audiovisual cultural products with a wide audience, it is useful to draw on analytical categories from studies of Western films—such as stage settings, soundscapes, props, storylines, moral narratives, and character relationships—which may evoke a collective nostalgia for traditional rural life. Such interactive exchanges could extend beyond rural communities to urban audiences, as these audiovisual products present a constructed, stable image of 'traditional' rural life that much of modern Chinese society has never directly experienced.

The literature reviewed in this section highlights multiple theoretical perspectives on Chinese youth subculture, emphasising its evolution from traditional subculture theory to post-subcultural approaches within media and cultural studies. These perspectives provide a foundation for analysing the transformation of rural short videos into a prominent cultural scene on platforms such as Douyin, focusing on their expression, construction, and interaction within wider social structures.

- Drawing on traditional subculture theory, particularly insights from the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), and its subsequent critiques, rural youth cultural practices in China demonstrate significant complexity. While earlier subcultures were often examined through the lenses of resistance and class struggle, contemporary rural short videos, such as Tuwei videos, illustrate how expressions of rural life now blend with modern media practices, challenging conventional notions of subcultural identity and resistance.

- Scene theory provides a complementary framework, offering a nuanced understanding of how cultural practices emerge and circulate in both spatial and virtual contexts. This approach is particularly useful for analysing how rural scenes are represented and consumed on digital platforms, facilitating the integration of rural culture into mainstream societal discourse.

- Interaction dynamics within these communities have shifted towards more collaborative and inclusive models, enabled by digital media. The concept of the 'neo-tribe' captures this phenomenon, demonstrating how shared interests and emotions transcend traditional boundaries of identity, fostering a more interconnected and participatory cultural landscape.

In conclusion, rural short videos on Douyin exemplify a contemporary form of cultural expression. Their significance extends beyond entertainment, functioning as cultural mediums that shape perceptions of rural identity within broader social narratives. Understanding these dynamics is essential for comprehending the evolving landscape of Chinese youth subcultures and their influence on social and cultural identities in contemporary China.

Issues of Digital Cultural Production

Cultural Production and Platformisation

This section reviews literature on the notion of platformisation (Helmond, 2015), which marks a significant shift in cultural practices. Platformisation is understood as an interactive process between digital platforms and cultural producers, characterised by the expansion of

platforms' economic, infrastructural, and regulatory influence into the cultural industries. It also entails the reorganisation of cultural practices—including labour, creativity, and participation—around the logics and affordances of platforms (Nieborg and Poell, 2018).

Platforms act as intermediaries, connecting users, enterprises or advertisers, governments, and other stakeholders. These actors converge to form a platform-based economic model that fundamentally differs from traditional media. Cultural producers, defined as 'a broad range of actors and organisations engaged in the creation, distribution, marketing, and monetisation of symbolic cultural artifacts' (Bourdieu, 1984), can leverage platforms to attract audiences and enhance visibility. This capacity is underpinned by the diversified business models offered by platforms. Individual cultural producers, or 'creative workers,' can attain more prominent production status by utilising the new market opportunities provided by the platform (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, 2021). Thus, platformisation creates opportunities for cultural producers through the connectivity of multiple stakeholders, enabling a degree of empowerment within the production process.

The platformisation of cultural production also raises complex challenges. For instance, the platform labour force reflects inequalities in terms of gender, sexual orientation, race, and ethnicity (Christian et al., 2020; Patel, 2020), mirroring disparities present in the traditional labour market. In other words, the same characteristic labels that mark inequities in conventional employment are reproduced in the platform economy, along with their attendant issues. Furthermore, cultural production in platformised contexts is not unconstrained, as platforms possess the power to filter content and privilege specific forms of cultural expression. These restrictions extend to governance. Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy (2021) note that platforms exercise governance through 'regulation, curation, moderation,' but, more importantly, they do so via a form of 'negotiated' governance:

> Governance is not so much imposed as it is negotiated. Cultural producers [...] mostly adapt their production process, but occasionally [...] negotiate with platforms about how governance should take shape [...] When cultural producers adapt to platform regulation. [...] they make platforms more central to the organisation of cultural production. When [...] negotiating with platforms, they [...] struggle over how governance should take shape while exerting their own mechanics of agency (p. 100).

This model of deliberative governance highlights the complex power dynamics inherent in platform-based cultural production. To gain popularity and visibility, cultural producers strategically adjust themes, content, and operational practices, reflecting a dependence on platform algorithms and management. In this context, the platform exercises a form of hegemony, while producers' participation in platform governance represents a negotiation with platform power.

It is important to determine whether Douyin qualifies as a 'platform' and whether rural short videos constitute platform-based cultural production from a cultural production perspective. Given the market reach and profitability of ByteDance and its subsidiaries Douyin and TikTok, as well as their vast user base in China and internationally, these platforms are considered 'digitally dominant' (Moore and Tambini, 2018). Additionally, as discussed in the section on 'Understanding Rural Youth on Short Video Platforms,' the Douyin platform's data collection and distribution processes render media content both visible and invisible, providing insights into the platform's business model as described in the literature above.

Governmental forces also operate as key stakeholders on Douyin. Considering China's national context, platforms are not immune to censorship or the requirements of a compliance culture, which represents a major distinction between Douyin and TikTok and other so-called 'liberal platforms.' Research by Chen, Kaye, and Zeng (2021) highlights the promotion of 'positive energy' to disseminate national ideology, which can constrain the grassroots nature of users and content; this ideological effort is reflected in a dedicated area on the Douyin platform. ByteDance employs over 10,000 moderators to monitor all cultural content on Douyin and ensure compliance with Chinese censorship regulations (Chen et al., 2021). When content addresses political or public topics, Davis (2019) notes that the platform may prohibit 'any words, images, flags, or other content that expresses support for the independence of disputed territories such as Taiwan, Hong Kong, Tibet, or Xinjiang' (n.p.), as well as content that mocks the national anthem, the Communist Party, major policies, or national laws.

To summarise, Douyin can be appropriately conceptualised as a 'platform'. Within this platform-based market, rural youth producers (RYPs) constitute a labour force characterised by their regional and social backgrounds. These producers rely on Douyin to engage in the

full cycle of cultural production, dissemination, and governance. Unlike other international platforms, the processes of cultural production, dissemination, and governance on Douyin carry significant political implications, necessitating a detailed examination of national policies, platform operations, and the production experiences of cultural producers.

Cultural Production and digital intermediation

Coincidentally, the interaction among participants in cultural content production on the platform can also be analysed through the theoretical lens of digital intermediation.

> The extent of intermediation and meaning between content production and consumption is at its peak when platforms, regulation, commercial imperatives, content creators and automated and predictive calculations are combined: the process of digital intermediation (Hutchinson, 2023, p. 18).

In the recently published monograph, Hutchinson (2023) explains that digital intermediaries comprise a combination of digital media actors, including technology, institutions, and automated processes. When combined with the perspective offered by platformisation theory, this combination represents a complex process of production, distribution, and consumption of cultural content on platforms. Building on the work of Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy (2021), who examined visibility and the role of human intermediation in platformised cultural production, Hutchinson emphasises the intermediary role of invisible infrastructure, focusing on technologies, institutions, and automation. I argue that these two scholarly perspectives are complementary, jointly elucidating the ecology of cultural production on digital platforms.

There is an interesting contrast here. Bourdieu's (1984) concept of 'cultural intermediaries' describes the movement of cultural information and the value this movement confers upon various stakeholders. Cultural intermediaries can transform marginal cultural activities into broader audiences by identifying potential areas of interest (Hutchinson, 2017). In this process, traditional art, music, and other forms of cultural information are endowed with meaning and value. In the context of digital intermediation, a similar process occurs, with cultural producers exercising intermediary functions to some extent. However, the flow of cultural information increasingly passes through invisible, non-human infrastructures. The

concept of digital intermediation contributes to understanding how media production and consumption operate, particularly regarding how cultural producers 'navigate the technological, agency, and automation components to enable and, in some cases, increase their visibility' (Hutchinson, 2023, p. 31). Building on earlier discussions of automation and algorithmic culture on short video platforms, I argue that cultural information on Douyin circulates via invisible algorithms and recommendation mechanisms—numerical systems that fundamentally structure and shape the platform's content flows. These algorithmic infrastructures serve as crucial intermediaries in the dissemination and visibility of cultural content. Consequently, by combining these invisible technological, institutional, and automated infrastructures with RYPs' experiences in rural short video production, we can better understand the processes of production, circulation, meaning making, and value creation in rural short video culture.

In addition, an important contribution of cultural production research within a digital media framework is its ability to examine the capital-building capacities of cultural producers, highlighting three key dimensions: social capital, economic capital, and political capital (Hutchinson, 2023). The accumulation of capital across these dimensions can serve as the foundation for ongoing cultural production on platforms. In other words, it constitutes a process of 'continuing to create and publish content that their audiences are interested in and that will also be highlighted by the platforms they operate within' (Hutchinson, 2023, p. 32). This value-added activity of digital cultural production can be applied to the rural short video production explored in this study. It is conceivable that, through observation and understanding of algorithms and recommendation mechanisms, RYPs continue to produce rural-related content topics that attract user interest and engagement. As a result, Douyin users are more likely to encounter these videos, thereby increasing both the visibility of the content and its value within Douyin's media ecosystem. Based on this conceptualisation, the personal capital RYPs accumulate on the Douyin platform becomes a key focus for this study, as it illuminates how their cultural production experiences translate into the value of cultural products, and what information, opportunities, or resources are gained or sacrificed in the process.

A comprehensive review of key theoretical directions in contemporary cultural production research provides valuable insights into how the technologies and functionalities of the

Douyin platform shape the expression, dissemination, and consumption of rural short videos in this study. Specifically:

- Power dynamics: This perspective emphasises the inherent power relations in platform-mediated cultural production, including issues of platform dominance, dependence, and intellectual property control. In this study, it facilitates an exploration of the complex power interactions experienced by RYPs, including their reliance on the platform and how this manifests in practice. Considering China's national context, this perspective also allows examination of how rural policies affect rural short video culture across production, dissemination, and governance.

- Mediation considerations: Digital intermediation theory focuses on how digital technologies mediate cultural production processes. In this study, this perspective provides a framework for understanding the Douyin platform's role in connecting RYPs, creative agencies, audiences, and governance structures.

- Gatekeeping dynamics: This aspect of digital intermediation sheds light on the gatekeeping functions of digital platforms, exploring how algorithms, recommendation systems, and content moderation influence which cultural products gain visibility. Applied to Douyin, it helps explain the RYPs' cultural production experience by examining who the gatekeepers are, how RYPs interact with them, and the challenges that arise.

- Capital building: Platformisation theories often emphasise economic dimensions such as revenue models, monetisation strategies, and the commodification of cultural content within the platform ecosystem. Focusing on rural short videos, this perspective enables exploration of the commercialisation of content and RYPs' experiences in accumulating economic capital. When combined with the digital intermediation framework, and incorporating social and political capital perspectives, it also helps explain how RYPs create additional value for their content in terms of popularity, visibility, and cultural influence.

By integrating insights from digital intermediation and platformisation theories, this study gains a comprehensive understanding of how Douyin and its digital technologies shape rural short video cultural production, dissemination, and consumption. Furthermore, this

integration provides a framework to analyse how these factors influence cultural content diversity, creative autonomy, and the democratisation of cultural expression.

Conclusion

This literature review chapter establishes a comprehensive theoretical foundation for analysing the cultural production of rural short videos on Douyin within the context of evolving rural policies in China. Drawing on diverse academic fields—including rural studies, youth culture, subculture theory, and digital platform studies—the chapter highlights how rural short video production reflects both continuity and transformation in rural cultural practices. Traditional rural identities are being reshaped through digital tools and platforms, providing rural youth with new opportunities for self-expression, visibility, and engagement with wider audiences. The reviewed literature illustrates how rural youth navigate the dual pressures of modernisation and platform governance, balancing personal aspirations with economic, social, and political constraints, and underscores the complex interplay among rural youth, digital media, and sociopolitical structures.

The literature highlights the relevance of scene theory (Straw, 1991) and post-subculture theory (Maffesoli, 1996) for understanding rural youth digital practices. Unlike traditional subculture theories, which emphasise class-based resistance, post-subculture theory focuses on fluid, decentralised cultural scenes organised around shared interests and emotions. This perspective is particularly useful for analysing how rural youth construct cultural identities and narratives on digital platforms, transcending geographic and social boundaries. On Douyin, rural short videos generate virtual scenes that showcase rural life and combine traditional cultural symbols with contemporary digital aesthetics. These scenes foster emotional connections with audiences, break down urban–rural binaries, and support a more integrated cultural discourse.

Moreover, cultural circuit theory (Johnson, 1997; Du Gay et al., 1997) offers critical insights into how rural short videos operate as cultural artifacts within a continuous cycle of production, dissemination, and reception. This model emphasises the cyclical and interactive nature of cultural production, highlighting that content creation is not linear but an ongoing feedback loop shaped by both producers and audiences. It is particularly relevant to Douyin, where algorithms and audience interactions significantly influence the visibility and

engagement of rural short videos. Applying this framework allows the study to examine how rural youth content is shaped by audience feedback and platform mechanisms, which in turn informs their cultural expression and digital identity.

The concept of platformisation (Nieborg and Poell, 2018) offers a valuable theoretical foundation for analysing the role of digital platforms in shaping cultural production. Platforms such as Douyin act as intermediaries connecting users, content creators, advertisers, and the state, thereby generating new economic and cultural opportunities. Nevertheless, platform-based cultural production is not without challenges. Factors such as algorithmic visibility, content moderation, and platform governance determine which cultural products are promoted and how they are consumed. For rural youth, understanding and navigating these platform dynamics is crucial for gaining visibility and sustaining cultural production. This study draws on the concept of digital intermediation (Hutchinson, 2023) to examine the invisible infrastructure of algorithms and recommendation systems that shapes the production, circulation, and reception of rural short videos on Douyin.

The chapter also highlights the role of Chinese state power in shaping platform-based cultural production. Douyin operates within a governance framework defined by national policies that prioritise social stability and promote state ideologies. Research indicates that Douyin's governance structures intertwine commercial interests with state objectives, creating a distinctive regulatory environment for content creators. These insights underscore how rural youth must navigate both platform algorithms and state-imposed cultural norms, adding layers of complexity to their cultural production practices.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter outlines the research methods employed in my study on rural digital cultural production under shifting rural policies in China. It describes the data collected from multiple sources, including rural policy documents, relevant government and industry reports, and six months of online fieldwork on the Douyin platform conducted in 2022. Additionally, the chapter explains how this data was analysed. The first section focuses on digital ethnography in the context of platform-based rural cultural production, highlighting its value for understanding the processes of cultural production by rural youth on digital platforms. This includes examining tensions between short video production, rural digital cultural representations, platform activities, and the state's rural cultural governance. In this section, I also detail the methods of data collection and analysis, including desk research, online field diaries, interviews, coding cycles, analytical memos, thematic analysis, and document analysis. These methods were applied to address the study's three research questions:

- RQ1: How have Chinese national rural policies since 2018 shaped the digital development of rural areas, and in what ways does the Douyin platform mediate policy dissemination and influence rural short video production?

- RQ2: What are the expressive forms of rural short videos, and how do rural youth producers construct the digital rural scene?

- RQ3: How do rural youth producers participate in the digital intermediation process and how do interactions in this process influence their continued production?

In addition, because rural short video production occurs on online platforms, the linguistic and cultural contexts are highly complex. This complexity raises important questions about how rural discourse should be accurately understood and interpreted. In addressing these challenges, the study also considers ethical issues, anonymity concerns, and translation difficulties encountered during the research process.

Practicing Digital Ethnography

This research was conducted following the principles of digital ethnography. However, since the Douyin platform was launched in 2017 and did not gain global popularity until after 2019, it was necessary to adopt a flexible and creative methodological approach. Rather than strictly applying pre-existing frameworks for short video research, this study responds to the complexity and dynamic nature of Douyin's bottom-up network communication (Hine, 2015; Marres, 2017). In this exploratory context, I used multiple variables to map the forms of rural short videos, and the types of communication users are likely to encounter on the platform. These variables facilitate an examination of the virtual rural scenes constructed by rural youth. Importantly, the study does not focus on specific authors or KOLs and their influence, but rather on the culturally meaningful forms of communication produced by rural youth. This approach provides a foundation and potential guidance for future cultural ethnography studies of other user groups on Douyin.

This digital ethnography study commenced in November 2021 and was conducted primarily online. It investigates the digital transformation of rural cultural production by examining the evolving power dynamics in the cultural production practices of rural youth on the Douyin platform. Prior to this doctoral project, I participated in a rural poverty project in Hebei Province, visiting over 200 households between 2016 and 2019. These experiences provided foundational insights into rural cultural resources from multiple perspectives, including economic conditions, living environments, social norms, and patterns of entertainment consumption. This background informed and motivated my interest in how digital platforms and media are integrated into rural cultural life.

Digital ethnography, as a comprehensive method for studying digital environments (Murthy, 2008), differs from traditional ethnographic approaches that rely on participant observation within physical communities. It integrates a range of tools and techniques to analyse digital artifacts, user behaviours, and the broader socio-technical structures shaping online interactions. This approach reflects the transformation and integration of ethnographic methods with digital technologies. According to Rogers (2013), digital ethnography not only applies traditional research methods to online spaces but also adapts them to the digital environment. Rogers emphasises the importance of viewing digital technology and the internet not only as objects of study but also as sources of research, focusing on cultural change and social conditions mediated through the internet. Unlike netnography, which

concentrates on specific network communities, digital ethnography examines broader relational clusters within the digital environment, including those not directly related to the immediate research subject (Consolazio, 2017).

This approach offers significant advantages for understanding power relations in rural short video production. As digital cultural products, short videos exist within a broader process of digital intermediation (Hutchinson, 2023). Neither the production team nor the online community alone can fully shape the trajectory of rural short video culture. As highlighted in the literature review, this culture is co-constructed by multiple factors, including platform infrastructure, algorithms, and rural policies. The sensitive use of digital ethnography to explore media environments facilitates a nuanced analysis of RQ3: *How do rural youth producers participate in the digital intermediation process, and how do interactions within this process influence their continued production?* By observing the dynamics of the Douyin platform and broader patterns of media consumption, I draw on prior knowledge to examine various types of network data and analyse the social behaviours they reveal.

Second, this study refrains from defining rural short video culture as a traditional subculture, instead adopting concepts such as 'neo-tribe' (Maffesoli, 1996; Bennett, 1999) and 'scene' (Straw, 1991) to capture its high mobility and decentralisation. In the Chinese context, rural youth's cultural practices on Douyin are not merely expressions of lifestyle or personal development but also form part of the broader political narrative of rural governance and constitute a key component of Douyin's cultural resources. This cultural space represents a convergence of traditional rural values, mainstream social ideology, and modern market culture, making it difficult to categorise under a single cultural label. Such complexity enriches the analysis of RQ1: *How have Chinese national rural policies since 2018 shaped the digital development of rural areas, and in what ways does the Douyin platform mediate policy dissemination and influence rural short video production?* This question highlights that as media and social environments evolve, so too does cultural production. Consequently, a static policy framework may be insufficient to capture the dynamic interactions between national political narratives, rural cultural life, and platform economies. The value of ethnography, therefore, lies in its emphasis on processes of change and movement rather than fixed power structures, making it particularly well-suited to the Chinese context of this study.

Third, digital ethnography is particularly well-suited to capturing the 'transient' nature of cultural products on Douyin, such as rural short videos. The platform's trends and individual

videos are inherently ephemeral, and the act of viewing a rural short video can be seen as a temporary connection between the self, the producer, and other viewers, each engaging with distinct motivations. This connection often dissipates once the video ends, only to re-form when the next video is encountered (Arvidsson and Caliandro, 2016). This sustained focus on brief encounters provides a more accurate representation of Douyin's short video ecology than would be achieved by focusing solely on individual producers or isolated discussion communities. Schellewald's (2021) research on TikTok underscores that capturing the transience of digital content can reveal recurring communication patterns across short video platforms, including themes such as comedy, documentary, community, explanatory, interactive, and meta-styles. In this regard, digital ethnography offers a more appropriate framework than netnography, as it does not rely heavily on direct interaction with users. Instead, it examines how digital infrastructures—such as algorithms and platform functionalities—shape content production and dissemination. In addressing RQ2: *What are the expressive forms of rural short videos, and how do rural youth producers construct the digital rural scene?* observing how Douyin's embedded functions are used to express rural identity provides a more comprehensive understanding of how rural youth's digital cultural practices extend beyond symbolic representation to engage with broader processes of cultural governance.

In conducting digital ethnography, data collection for this project involved browsing and recording short videos, conducting online semi-structured interviews with rural producers, and gathering rural policy documents and other relevant reports. This process generated a substantial qualitative dataset comprising three main components: video data closely related to rural short videos, interview data reflecting rural youth's cultural production experiences, and documentary data on rural policies and news reports. Together, these data sources facilitate a critical analysis of the interaction between the productive agency of rural youth and the infrastructural and cultural governance power exerted by Douyin.

Online Fieldwork Overview and Timeframe

This study was conducted between October 2021 and September 2024, comprising three concentrated phases of data collection. The first phase of online fieldwork began in December 2021 with a pilot study on the Douyin platform. During this stage, I browsed 50 rural short videos under the hashtags #农村生活 (rural life) and #农村青年 (rural youth) to familiarise myself with the platform environment and to gain preliminary insights into the

characteristics of rural short video content. These videos were recorded and coded according to their themes, content, formats, settings, props, and other relevant attributes. From early 2022 to September 2022, data collection became more flexible and dispersed, focusing on gathering rural policy documents, news reports on rural digital development, and reviewing and organising relevant academic literature.

In October 2022, I entered the second concentrated phase of data collection, during which I spent six months browsing 300 videos under the hashtag #农村生活 (rural life). These videos were recorded according to the refined analytical framework developed during the pilot study, and two rounds of axial and longitudinal coding were subsequently conducted on this dataset. During this period, I also attempted to contact rural youth content producers featured in these videos via Douyin's chat function to facilitate potential interviews.

The third phase of data collection took place between April 2023 and February 2024. During this period, I continued to browse rural short videos, observing their production and circulation on the Douyin platform. Two rounds of interviews were conducted: the first consisted of online semi-structured interviews with twelve RYPs, and the second comprised unstructured interviews with two RYPs and one member of a creative institution. Following this stage, my focus shifted primarily to analysing the qualitative datasets, while I continued to browse rural short videos, as well as relevant academic and policy materials, to remain informed about emerging trends and future directions in rural digital content production in China.

The following sections detail the main methods used in the data collection process.

Desk research

Desk research has been a foundational component of this project. As outlined in the literature review, my focus centred on academic works concerning rural youth and short video platforms, youth culture, and digital cultural production. Before commencing online fieldwork, my initial desk research concentrated on the methodologies and theoretical frameworks of cultural and subcultural studies. I examined empirical studies rooted in British cultural studies, particularly those produced by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which are reflected in the current literature review. This stage of desk research informed both my pilot and formal coding processes, providing a foundation for analysing the thematic styles present in rural short video content.

As my desk research progressed from 2023 onwards, I incorporated emerging concepts of platformisation and digital mediation from recent academic discourse, which I categorised as relevant 'stakeholders'. These theoretical developments offered deeper insights into the media ecology of digital mediation and the interconnections among various stakeholders, including RYPs, Douyin's platform algorithms, creative institutions, and governance structures. This phase of desk research was particularly significant in revealing that RYPs in China operate within a complex system of interactions involving platforms, algorithms, governance, and other stakeholders, positioning rural short videos on Douyin as products of collaborative processes rather than solely as independent creations of rural youth.

Over the past three years, debates on platform governance in the UK and EU have intensified. I recognised that the development of digital platforms in these regions has reshaped communication channels among the public, the state, and society, profoundly transforming the public sphere. Notably, works such as Habermas's *A New Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere and Deliberative Politics* (2023) and Philip Schlesinger's paper *The Post-Public Sphere and Neo-Regulation of Digital Platforms* (2024) provide critical analyses of 'neo-regulation' in the context of digital platforms. These studies offer theoretical frameworks for understanding how contemporary regulatory approaches address challenges to traditional public spheres while balancing national security and democratic discourse. Internet regulation, particularly in the EU and UK, has become a key policy focus, as digital platforms increasingly shape the formation and dissemination of public opinion.

Building on this context, I integrated the relationship between digital platforms and the public sphere into this project, examining the potential externalities of rural short videos and considering the extent to which they may be viewed as 'merit goods' (Doyle, 2013, p. 168) subject to regulatory oversight. While the concept of the public sphere is not fully applicable to China's state–society relations, I argue that the public nature of rural short video content merits examination, potentially constituting a form of 'digital public rural sphere', as discussed in Chapter 5. Historically, public discourse on rural youth life was largely controlled by mainstream state media; however, Douyin now provides rural youth with a space to express their perspectives on rural life, contributing to an emerging form of rural public opinion. By centring rural producers in discussions of digital platforms, I examine the tension between individual creators, state governance, and platform commercial interests, arguing that mutual dependence among these actors enables rural youth to articulate their identities actively and positively through digital mediation.

Beyond academic sources, my desk research also included government reports, with particular attention to the *No.1 Central Document*—a series of annual policy documents issued by the CPC Central Committee that have addressed agriculture, rural areas, and farmers (the 'three rural issues') for 21 consecutive years (2004–2024). Following the introduction of the *Rural Digital Development Strategy*, my analysis primarily focused on documents from 2018 to 2023, while earlier documents dating back to 2004 were reviewed for contextual understanding. The *No.1 Central Document* is widely regarded as the most significant national policy document addressing rural issues in China, attracting considerable attention from both the media and local governments.

In addition, I examined the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)*, jointly issued by ten governmental departments, including the Central Cyberspace Administration of China. This plan includes a chapter on rural culture that directly relates to rural cultural production. As analysed in the following chapter, the section titled *'Rural Internet Culture Revitalisation'* corresponds closely with Douyin's *'New Farmer Plan'*, which supports rural short video content and exemplifies the platform's policy 'filtering' function.

Overall, my desk research has been continuous and adaptive throughout the project. Several theoretical perspectives only emerged post-2023, midway through the study, yet I incorporated these new frameworks to enrich my analysis. While this flexibility may introduce variability in interpreting research texts and policy documents, I integrated both international and Chinese perspectives to ensure that my study contributes empirical insights to ongoing debates, particularly concerning the Chinese experience of platform-based cultural production and governance.

Online Field Diary

Before formally browsing and analysing short videos, I conducted pilot work using Douyin's topic search function to identify rural-related tags with the highest view counts. To minimise the influence of the platform's recommendation algorithm on personal search preferences, I created a new Douyin account. In October 2022, I browsed and recorded the first 300 short videos under the #农村生活 (rural life) tag, along with their associated metadata, in addition to the 50 videos coded during the pilot study, and maintained an online field diary.

This online diary served as a core data collection tool, allowing me to observe rural short video content continuously over a six-month period. Given Douyin's algorithmic

recommendation system, which tailors content based on user browsing habits, posed potential limitations by directing users into repetitive content cycles, thereby creating a specific 'information cocoon' (Schellewald, 2021, pp. 1438–1439). To mitigate this issue and ensure a more comprehensive view of rural youth cultural practices, the study prioritised a tag-based search strategy. By using the #农村生活 (rural life) tag, I captured a broader spectrum of content, avoiding repeated exposure to videos from the same authors or on similar themes.

This fieldwork approach included constructing a detailed field diary using spreadsheets, grounded in the ethnographic principle that writing and recording are essential for capturing nuanced cultural phenomena (Wang, 2018). As an extension of traditional ethnography adapted to the internet, the field diary provided a structured method for documenting online content browsing. Each horizontal row in the spreadsheet represented a single video entry, containing a brief description of scene-setting techniques and thematic content aligned with RQ2, alongside metrics reflecting the video's communication effects, such as likes, comments, reposts, and favourites. Columns summarised video themes and styles, with categories evolving as new patterns emerged, including simple portrayals of rural life or humorous rural skits. This approach facilitated a layered understanding of the short video genre and served as the groundwork for subsequent coding and content analysis. Variables were refined based on Shifman's (2013) memetic framework, which divides content analysis into three dimensions: content, form, and stance. 'Content' refers to the specific ideas and ideologies conveyed, including identity, emotion, and language. The 'form' dimension reflects the physical features of the video shaping user perception, such as number of actors, spatial arrangement, audio, and visual elements, contributing to scene construction. 'Stance,' as Shifman explains, represents the creators' positioning relative to the first two dimensions, capturing the intended messaging style and tone (p. 367). This stance was recorded in the first column of the spreadsheet, enabling a systematic description of style based on scene-setting and thematic content.

In my practice, the form dimension expands upon four variables—number of people, space, vision, and audio—which are particularly suitable for examining scene construction in short videos. Similarly, the content dimension extends to four variables: content, identity, emotion, and language. Together, these detailed variables support the research goals of exploring rural short video scene construction and thematic development. The stance dimension reflects the content creator's perception of the first two dimensions and their intended outcomes. This is captured in the style description recorded in the first column of the spreadsheet, through

analysis of both scene and theme. These fine-grained variables, derived from iterative video browsing, constitute the foundational framework for integrating the field diary during the initial stage of the study (see Table 1).

EFFECTS	
Length	
Likes	
Comments	
Favorites	
Shares	
SCENE SETTINGS	
Actor number	People number counting (1,2,3…)
Space	The location of video setting (living room, yard, field/farm, factory …)
Audio	The audio type (original song, local ballad, reused song, no song)
Visual	Text (title, subtitle …)
	Platform effects (filter, beauty camera, edit effects …)
	Rural elements (meals, clothes, rural products …)
THEMES	
Contents	Overall description of the video content.
Identity	Relationship among actors, family roles …
Emotion	Moved. Funny, lyrical, pessimistic …
Language	Mandarin, local dialects, internet buzzwords …

Table 1: Structure of field diary (source: author)

In subsequent analysis, these refined variables were further developed into more nuanced categories and detailed code descriptions to enhance and consolidate the video dataset for this project. Following the initial video recording, the qualitative content analysis revisited the video samples to refine and integrate the entries. This iterative process was crucial for identifying variations in form and content that shape rural short video cultural expressions. For instance, videos with similar scene constructions (form) could differ substantially in topic and tone (content). I employed this ongoing reassessment and adaptation of content categories to strengthen the validity of the short video analysis. The coding process will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

Interviews

This project employed interviews, a common ethnographic data collection method (Qu and Dumay, 2011; Belk, Kozinets and Fischer, 2012), to gain deeper insights into the interaction experiences of RYPs with digital platforms and policies. Semi-structured interviews were primarily used due to their open-ended nature, which allows participants to express themselves freely and is particularly valuable for exploring cultural production experiences (Bryman, 2012). As Salmons (2015) notes, semi-structured interviews balance the structure of pre-planned questions with the flexibility of unstructured formats (p. 21). In the context of digital ethnography, direct engagement with participants enriches qualitative data and complements observations from earlier ethnographic stages (Kozinets, 2015). The open-ended question format also allowed for flexibility in tailoring questions to reflect each rural producer's unique experiences and activities, such as participation in the *New Farmer Plan 2022*, maintaining sensitivity to real-world contexts (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Comparing responses to the same questions across participants enabled critical analysis and formed the basis of findings presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. This comparative approach highlights multiple perspectives on key arguments and evidence.

For detailed information on interview questions, refer to the 'Interview Guide' in Appendix A. Interview topics were developed based on academic and policy materials gathered during the desk research phase, with a focus on connections to Research Questions 1, 2, and 3. For example, RQ1 investigates the policy landscape of rural short video production, particularly the dissemination and impact of digital rural development strategies. Examining rural groups' perspectives on policies and their practical experiences on the Douyin platform provides a grounded view of platform-based rural cultural production, complementing the idealised nature of policy documents (Danziger, 1995; Watson, 2011; Szulecki and Overland, 2020). Similarly, RQ3 explores how rural producers leverage platform infrastructures to build personal capital within their cultural production. In this context, short video content serves to supplement arguments and provide empirical evidence. Therefore, unstructured interviews effectively complement online field diaries, contributing to a comprehensive qualitative dataset for addressing the three research questions.

The interviews were conducted online because content producers are dispersed across China, making in-person meetings impractical. Online interviews therefore provided the most feasible solution. In selecting a communication platform, it was important to consider the

familiarity of RYPs with available technologies. Many rural youths have limited experience with platforms beyond Douyin, reflecting a potential digital divide (Zhu, 2017). Consequently, WeChat—a widely used and accessible social media app in both rural and urban areas—was chosen as the primary medium for real-time interviews. WeChat supports various functionalities, including Voice-Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) for asking and answering questions with live audio, videoconferencing for seeing participants during conversation, and shared applications for viewing and discussing documents, media, or examples. It also allows participants to generate responses through writing, drawing, or diagramming ideas on a shared whiteboard or in documents (Salmons, 2015, pp. 6–7). These corresponding functions in WeChat include text messaging, voice and video calling, and file sharing (Zhou et al., 2023, p. 3), making it suitable for conducting online interviews. These channels were selected after preliminary communication with participants, allowing flexibility to adapt the interview method to individual preferences and supporting the broader digital ethnography approach.

Regarding the sampling of interviews, the purpose of conducting interviews in this study was to collect exploratory and descriptive qualitative data from RYPs; therefore, the sample size is intentionally small and does not require quantitative statistical inference. Probability sampling is not essential for this study. Additionally, given constraints of time, cost, and the limited availability of personal information about rural youth on the platform, establishing a comprehensive probability sampling framework is challenging (Fenton and Procter, 2019). Consequently, non-probability sampling was employed to support the study's research objectives. Specifically, participants were selected with priority given to creators of the 50 short videos from the pilot coding phase and the 300 short videos in the formal online field diary. This approach combines interview data with video content analysis to enhance understanding of the production process and its coherence. Moreover, rural short video creators encountered during ongoing platform browsing were also considered. Before contacting potential participants, two selection criteria were established: (1) a high level of audience engagement, measured by the number of comments and shares, and (2) substantial content creation, assessed by the duration and volume of their output on Douyin. Creators meeting at least one of these criteria were recorded as potential participants.

Furthermore, considering the difficulty of reaching individuals across a vast digital network, this study also employed snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013), encouraging participants to refer other relevant individuals. This approach facilitated contact with two rural producers and a director from a creative agency, providing deeper insights into rural youth's online

communities and the video production process. Overall, the combined use of non-probability and snowball sampling helped bridge technological and logistical gaps, enabling a more comprehensive understanding of rural short video production and its stakeholders.

Based on the sampling methods described above, I conducted two rounds of interviews between April 2023 and February 2024. The first round consisted of semi-structured interviews with 12 RYPs, conducted according to the interview guide. The second round involved open-ended interviews with two rural producers and one member of a creative agency, focusing on limited topics. Among the 14 participants, eight were selected from the digital field diary, two were referred by earlier participants, and four had not been previously recorded in the diary. All participants were aged between 18 and 30. All 15 interviews were recorded with participants' consent and lasted approximately one hour. The entire process was conducted in strict accordance with the 'Consent to the Use of Data' (see Appendix B) and the 'Plain Language Participant Information Statement' (see Appendix C), which included an option for anonymity. Ethical and anonymity considerations are discussed in the following section. The respondent information table summarising these details is provided in Appendix D.

Ethics and anonymity

When designing the qualitative data collection and analysis for this study, ethical considerations were planned in advance and approved by the Glasgow University College of Arts Research Ethics Committee (100220016). To contact interview participants, I initiated communication through the private chat interface on the target blogger's Douyin account. As Douyin does not support file uploads in its chat interface, I first sent a brief introductory message explaining the purpose of the contact, including a self-introduction and details of my interview intentions. With the participant's consent, I subsequently sent the complete 'Consent to the Use of Data' form and the 'Plain Language Participant Information Statement (PIS)' (see Appendix) via a personal WeChat account. This two-step approach—initial introduction on Douyin followed by formal consent via WeChat—was designed to ensure that participants fully understood the study's purpose and procedures, thereby facilitating a smooth and flexible interview process. All 15 participants were contacted through this method and provided the necessary signed consent forms.

For conducting the interviews, I used WeChat, the same platform previously employed to establish initial contact. As a widely adopted social platform in China, WeChat is developed

and maintained by Tencent and has over a billion users across urban and rural regions. It supports multiple communication functions, including text messaging, voice/video calling, and file sharing (Zhou et al., 2023, p. 3). During the interview planning phase, given that the target group comprises rural youth who use Douyin to express themselves, I initially assumed that video calls would be the preferred mode of interview. However, when participants were offered a choice, all 15 opted for voice calls, with three also using supplementary text communication. This preference highlighted the importance of considering the unique context of rural participants and heightened my awareness of my own outsider status. Their rural environment and occupational circumstances shape their identity and behaviour (Gasson and Errington, 1993), and since their work often overlaps with family and leisure activities (Kuehne, 2016), video calls may have felt intrusive in a domestic setting. Additionally, the digital divide in rural China, characterised by limited familiarity with video call functions (Zhu, 2017), may have influenced their preference.

Anonymity was another critical ethical consideration. In the 'Consent to the Use of Data' form, each participant was given the option to remain anonymous. In this study, individuals interviewed for qualitative data collection are referred to as 'participants'. During the online interviews, 12 participants opted for anonymity, while 3 consented to disclose their Douyin IDs. Accordingly, after transcribing the interviews, participants' information was presented in the participant information file (see Appendix D) according to their preferences: anonymised participants are identified only by serial number, gender, role, and date, whereas the information of non-anonymous participants includes their Douyin IDs. Specific quotations are cited using an anonymous code along with the interview date, ensuring consistency and confidentiality in reporting.

Data analysis

Document analysis

The collection and analysis of rural policy documents, combined with short video content analysis and interviews, helped to reveal the policy framework under which rural short video culture on the Douyin platform emerges and develops. My analysis of the published *No.1 Central Document* highlights key issues in China's rural policy, including the development of the internet and the cultivation of rural cultural subjectivity, and provides insight into the evolving trajectory of rural policy, particularly given the increasing prominence of the digital rural development strategy. The representative document *Rural Digital Development Action*

Plan (2022-2025) exemplifies this trend. Careful reading of policy texts during desk research and subsequent analysis reveals how the content and distribution of rural short videos are shaped by rural cultural governance, and how the Douyin platform aligns with these policies through its commercial activities. Furthermore, interviews with rural youth producers uncovered gaps in their understanding of policy content.

In addition to the *No.1 Central Document* and the *Rural Digital Development Action Plan (2022-2025)*, I reviewed a range of supplementary materials. These included a research report on short videos and agricultural analysis by the Institute of Agricultural Economics and Development; an official statement and activity page on the Douyin platform regarding the *New Farmer Plan 2022*; a policy text introducing the 'new farmer' initiative from the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs of the People's Republic of China; the white paper *Youth of China in the New Era (2022)*; and news reports from sources such as *China Daily* and *People's Daily Online*. Collectively, these documents encompass rural policy texts, news reports concerning the Douyin platform, rural culture and youth, as well as industry research on short videos and agriculture.

Coding cycle and analytical memo

During coding and content analysis, the cycle operates as a process of refining codes and classifications, since codes generated in earlier stages may later be modified, merged, or deleted. As Saldaña (2016) argues, 'as you progress toward second cycle coding, you might rearrange and reclassify coded data into different and even new categories' (p. 12). In this study, once the field diary framework after the framework of the field diary had been determined, the first cycle of coding—descriptive coding—was conducted. Descriptive coding is particularly suitable for research employing multiple modalities, such as field notes and interviews, and aids in identifying underlying themes within the data while addressing ethnographic research questions (Turner, 1994). Moreover, description forms the foundation for qualitative research interpretation and is appropriate for documenting and analysing products and environments in ethnographic field studies (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, pp. 121–130). Descriptive coding also generates a preliminary classification of data content, which serves as the basis for the second cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2016, p. 102). Once the detailed classification is established, it is retained and further refined during the second round of coding and content analysis. This study adheres strictly to Saldaña's framework from initial coding through to conclusion, as illustrated in Figure 6.

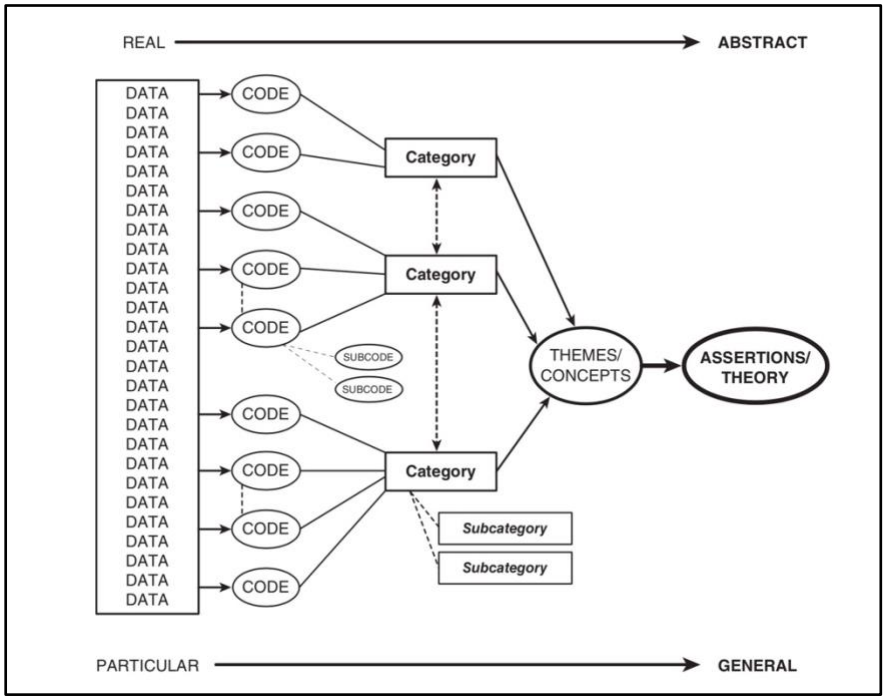

Figure 6: Streamlined codes-to-theory model for qualitative inquiry (Saldaña, 2016, p. 14)

To apply Saldaña's model, the first cycle of descriptive coding was derived from the initial data in the online field diary and used to identify more detailed categories. This was followed by a second cycle of coding, integrated with content analysis within this framework (see Figure 7). Two rounds of coding allow for a more systematic and nuanced analysis of field diary data.

For example, consider the variable of 'space', which was generated to explore the construction of rural scenes and their role in revealing how rural youth selectively expose rural life or make personal experiences accessible. In the pilot phase of the field diary, rural yard spaces frequently appeared. In the subsequent formal analysis, video data featuring rural yards were extracted and reorganised in a separate file to facilitate taxonomic narrative descriptions of rural scene construction, generating more meaningful data. Natural rural elements and traditional agricultural components dominate these scenes, while modern industrialised elements are rarely present.

Moreover, video content descriptions were refined beyond the basic level of the field diary, offering richer classifications and interpretative depth. For instance, the act of 'playing in a rural yard' might be more specifically described as 'practicing humour that contrasts with the atmosphere under a wall of dirt and firewood'. This detailed coding and classification process contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

Beyond analysing rural short video content (RQ2), this ongoing refinement process also supports exploration of other research questions, such as how rural policies potentially influence RYPs' content (RQ1), and how RYPs actively construct content and production practices to accumulate personal capital within a digitally mediated environment (RQ3). The specific coding process is illustrated in Figure 3.

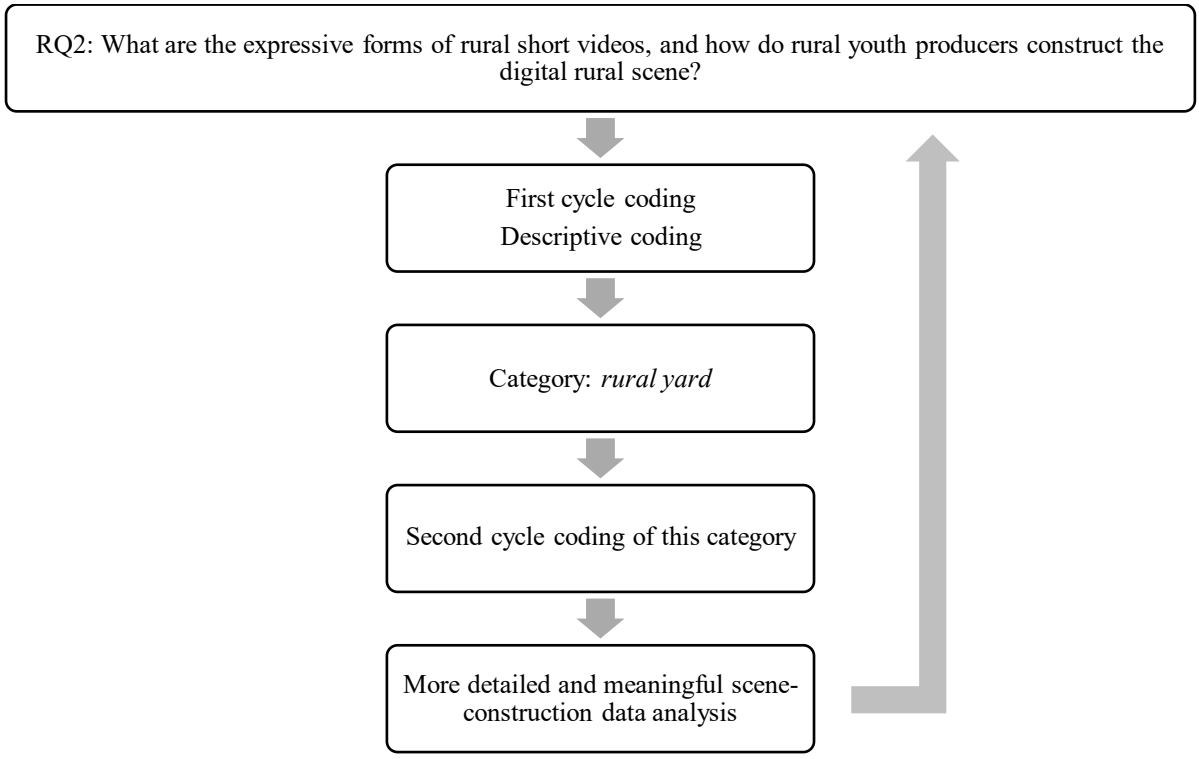

Figure 7: Process of coding cycle (source: author)

The memos maintained during online fieldwork constitute an important form of metadata, strengthening the connection between field diary coding and subsequent interview coding. Unlike online field diaries, which may contain semiotic metaphors and the researcher's subjective impressions, interview content analysis tends to focus on purely qualitative data. This is because codes for qualitative data analysis typically do not incorporate metaphorical interpretations (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). Accordingly, this study follows Saldaña's guidance, applying a cyclical coding process to the interview data. As Saldaña (2016, p. 9) explains:

> Rarely is the first cycle of coding data perfectly attempting. The second cycle (and possibly the third and fourth, etc.) of recoding further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient features of the qualitative data record for

> generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory (p. 9).

This iterative and evolving approach facilitates refinement of the interview content. Additionally, the field diary serves as part of an 'analytical memo' (Saldaña, 2016, p. 44). Analytical memos and coding are considered concurrent activities in qualitative data analysis (Weston et al., 2001). Memo writing provides the researcher with a reflective space, allowing continuous evaluation of how research materials, observations, and analytic decisions influence the research process and outcomes (Mason, 2002). This reflective practice helps address challenges encountered during coding and strengthens the reliability and validity of qualitative interpretations.

While recording online field diaries, I observed that some short videos featured tags unrelated to rural themes. These instances were documented in my memos, and during interviews, I asked rural producers about their understanding of and experiences with using these tags. This approach provided nuanced insights into the interplay between rural short videos and policy discourse. For example, videos tagged as 'positive energy' on Douyin may reflect forms of 'playful patriotism', creating an online patriotic space that reinforces China's social norms and governance structures (Chen, Kaye, and Zeng, 2021, p. 113).

During interviews, some specific topics beyond the pre-planned open-ended questions were noted, prompting deeper discussions in the second round. For example, collaboration between RYPs and creative agencies was not included in the initial interview guide. However, as conversations unfolded, I identified this as a crucial strategy for rural producers to navigate the algorithmic 'black box'. Seven of the twelve participants reported having worked with creative agencies, and their accounts of conflicting narratives in these collaborations highlighted tensions around creative rights. Insights from these memos inform the analytical findings in Chapter 6, particularly regarding the involvement of creative agencies in rural short video production.

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis was primarily employed to interpret the rural video data. Although it has been considered as an analytical process of other qualitative research methods and lacks independence (Holloway and Todres, 2003), some scholars argue that thematic analysis should be regarded as a valuable method in its own right, providing essential skills applicable across various qualitative approaches (Braun and Clarke, 2006). According to the definition

by Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a method for identifying, analysing, organising, describing, and reporting patterns or themes within data sets. Unlike widely used approaches such as grounded theory or phenomenology, thematic analysis focuses specifically on the rigorous identification of themes, producing trustworthy and insightful findings.

In the context of this research, the short length of individual videos and the DIY nature of the Douyin platform make it challenging to apply discourse or textual analysis to a single video as a representative case. As indicated in the rationale for using digital ethnography earlier in this chapter, continuously browsing a large volume of videos, rather than focusing on individual cases, is a crucial step for exploring cultural content themes. The flexibility inherent in thematic analysis, along with its non-prescriptive stance on narrative structure (Braun and Clarke, 2006), encouraged me to complete a large number of video topic exploring work. To accurately describe the cultural content of rural short videos and integrate these findings into discussions of cultural policy and development, this study prioritised credibility. Credibility criteria follow the guidelines outlined by Nowell et al. (2017), and the specific measures applied in this study are briefly described below:

Process of thematic analysis	Means of Establishing Trustworthiness
Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with your data	• Conduct pilot coding to gain a preliminary understanding of the data. • Reflect on potential themes, drawing on pilot coding and variables in the formal video recording framework. • Write reflection memos as needed during the recording and coding process.
Phase 2: Generating initial codes	• Continue memo writing to capture insights and observations. • Apply a variable framework for video recording, informed by relevant theory and literature, as a preliminary guide for coding.
Phase 3: Searching for themes	• Refine themes iteratively, splitting or merging as the number of coded videos increases.

	• Document relationships between topics using concept maps to visualise connections.
Phase 4: Reviewing themes	• Revisit pre-designed topics and subtopics to test their consistency with the data. • Validate generalisation by referencing original videos and comparing across the dataset. • Integrate and triangulate findings with other data sources, such as interviews and policy documents.
Phase 5: Defining and naming themes	• Create detailed descriptions for each theme. • Assess the clarity, accuracy, and interpretive validity of theme descriptions using both literature and peer review.
Phase 6: Producing the report	• Identify the final set of themes. • Select illustrative cases for each theme to deepen understanding. • Discuss thematic patterns regarding similarities, differences, and broader contextual implications.

Table 2: Credibility measures and the description of this study (source: designed by the author)

Considering the characteristics of short video data and the importance of credibility, thematic analysis is deemed appropriate for this project. At present, no alternative analytical method appears capable of efficiently classifying large volumes of short video content while accurately capturing thematic patterns. Thematic analysis is applied under the assumption that rural short videos, as cultural artefacts, should retain thematic and content integrity to reflect their authentic sociocultural context. Given that audiences function as both producers and consumers on short video platforms, video themes are interpreted through audience perception rather than by examining individual videos in isolation. The fleeting and ephemeral nature of this content contributes to the broader cultural style of rural short videos. Additionally, in Phase 6 of the reporting process, one video with the highest dissemination effect was selected for each identified theme. The approach to case selection is based on measuring the data under the 'Effects' dimension from the online field diary (see Figure 2),

ranking videos according to Likes, Favourites, and Shares. These illustrative cases are presented in Chapter 5 to exemplify thematic patterns and their cultural significance.

Translation issues

This project employed digital ethnography, in which the production, dissemination, and analysis of rural short videos entailed cross-language interactions. Nearly all stages of the research required cultural, interlingual, and intralingual translation. Because the interpretation of many words, phrases, or symbols is deeply embedded in China's political, economic, social, and cultural contexts, addressing translation challenges remained a continuous concern throughout the study.

First, the definition and social context of 'rurality' in China differ markedly from Western conceptualisations due to China's agricultural heritage, collectivist norms, and family-oriented ideology. This reflects broader debates in translation studies concerning the transfer of meaning across languages and socio-political frameworks (Dai, 2017). Similarly, the term 'public sphere' requires careful consideration, as its classical Western conception (Habermas, 2023) does not map directly onto the Chinese context. In China, scholars have highlighted a 'third sphere' or 'third realm' (Huang, 1993; 2019) composed of distinctive features arising from the political-economic and political-legal traditions formed by the combination of a large centralised imperial state and a small-scale peasant economy. Building on this, the concept of a 'digital public rural sphere' is defined here as a semi-public, digitally mediated space in which rural youth actively create, circulate, and negotiate cultural and social discourse related to rural life. It provides a lens to observe how collective representations of rural life are constructed in online short-video content, particularly on platforms such as Douyin.

Following the view that translation involves negotiating conceptual shifts rather than merely substituting words (Flynn, 2023), I treated these terms not as direct equivalents but as interpretive constructs. Clarification was provided in the text and supplemented with footnotes where necessary, ensuring that the analytical framework reflected both the original theoretical intent and the specificities of Chinese rural digital practices. This approach recognises the challenges of theory translation, where a concept like the public sphere must be reconceptualised to capture the realities of digitally mediated rural discourse in China.

As a cross-cultural researcher, constructing a translation framework that ensured the validity of interlingual translation posed significant challenges. Inconsistencies in the collection, analysis, and presentation of empirical data were inevitable, as meaning fluctuates across linguistic and cultural contexts (Piekkari, Tietze, and Koskinen, 2020). To address these concerns, I retained the original language (Chinese) throughout the data collection and analysis process, translating only at the final presentation stage. While this approach increased the workload during the writing phase, it enhanced analytical accuracy and preserved the voices and perspectives of participants, allowing local empirical insights to be incorporated into global academic discourse (Chidarikire et al., 2018).

Intralingual translation, as an interpretive process, was pervasive throughout this research. Beyond textual translation, it involved understanding the nuanced meanings embedded in participants' responses and their cultural contexts. Unlike rigid translation frameworks, which assume direct equivalence between languages, intralingual translation is an ongoing interpretive negotiation (Petraru, 2015). I focused on bridging the perspectives of participants, the ecology of short video communication, the production context of policy texts, and my own positionality as a researcher. This approach aligns with calls for ethnographers to reflect on their translation practices and acknowledge the epistemological challenges inherent in cross-language research (Gibb, 2023). Specifically, during transcription, I paid close attention to preserving the participants' original meaning while ensuring descriptive accuracy. Furthermore, when analysing rural short videos, I observed audience discussions in comment sections. Although these comments were not part of my primary dataset, they provided contextual insights that helped document rural video content. In this sense, the entire process became an act of translation, where meaning was continuously reinterpreted and recontextualised (Dai, 2017).

The translation of policy texts presented additional challenges. Local governments and news agencies often produce secondary versions of official policies, which can shift meanings and values to align with political narratives. This phenomenon reflects broader issues in translation studies, where institutional and ideological constraints shape how meaning is conveyed (Flynn, 2023). Recognising these shifts was essential for understanding how policies were communicated to the public and how they influenced rural short video production.

Overall, translation challenges in this research extended beyond vocabulary explanations to deeper negotiations of meaning, ideology, and researcher subjectivity. Maintaining a balance

between local and national viewpoints was a core concern, as translation functions not only as a linguistic process but also as a mechanism for cultural representation (Piekkari, Tietze, and Koskinen, 2020). By critically engaging with translation as both an analytical tool and a research process, this study contributes to discussions on digital ethnography and cultural translation, reinforcing the argument that translation constitutes an act of knowledge production rather than mere linguistic transfer (Chidarikire et al., 2018).

I will now proceed to Chapter 4, which explores the complex relationship between rural digital development policies and the Douyin platform as a site of rural short video cultural production. This chapter establishes a contextual policy framework for examining rural short video content and the cultural production processes that will be analysed in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

Chapter Four: The Shifts of Rural Cultural Policy towards the Digital Era

This chapter is organised to address RQ1: *How have Chinese national rural policies since 2018 shaped the digital development of rural areas, and in what ways does the Douyin platform mediate policy dissemination and influence rural short video production?* It aims to interpret the policy context for rural youth producers' (RYPs) short video production. The data for this chapter primarily derive from various policy texts examined during desk research, as well as from records of 'Section D: Platform Policy Influence' and 'Section A: Background Information in the interviews' (see Appendix A: Interview Guide).

In contextualising the life changes of rural youth in China from the 1980s to the 2010s, policies prioritising urban development and resource allocation have profoundly shaped rural lifestyles. These rural policies, driven by economic development imperatives, positioned rural culture as a subordinate entity. On the one hand, it was guided by the urban elite culture promoted through China's urbanisation efforts; on the other hand, the cultural production needs of rural youth often remained unmet due to their mobile and semi-urbanised living conditions.

An examination of the *No.1 Central Document* from 2004 to 2023—particularly texts introduced after the concept of rural digital development was proposed in 2018—along with the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)*, reveals that rural policies are

undergoing a critical transformation. This transformation is evident in the historic first mention of 'rural subjectivity', the consistent promotion of digital infrastructure development over the years, and the heightened focus on rural culture, particularly digital rural culture. Compared to the previous historical period (1980s–2010s), it is reasonable to assert that rural development in China has entered the digital era from a policy perspective. Focusing on dimensions relevant to RYPs, particular emphasis is placed on the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' first proposed in 2018, identified as a core concept signifying China's transition to the digital era in rural development. This concept illustrates the extent to which it influences the reshaping of online cultural production in rural China.

In addition to analysing the conceptual characteristics, core issues, and objectives of the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy', this chapter also examines how policy ideas are transmitted from the top down to rural youth producers (RYPs) and the role of the Douyin platform in this process. This discussion highlights that Douyin functions as a 'filter' for rural policies, acting as a critical intermediary in the dissemination of contemporary rural policies to their primary audience—rural youth. Furthermore, through a forward-looking discussion of policy impacts, this chapter argues that the governance model for rural short video cultural production is collaboratively shaped by policies, platforms, and rural communities. This development represents a fragmentation of the traditional policy-driven model of rural cultural production. The resulting multi-stakeholder governance model profoundly influences the form and boundaries of rural cultural production itself.

Rural Digital Development Strategy

Rural Policy Before the Digital Era

In the early stages of my desk research on Chinese rural policies, I sought to archive policy documents that influence rural youth's cultural production within a specific analytical framework. My initial focus was on the *No.1 Central Document* established in 2018 and the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)*. However, during analysis, it became evident that relying solely on individual policy documents provided a fragmented narrative. Many documents intersect in their discussion of rural culture-related content, highlighting a key limitation: examining a single document constrains understanding of policymakers' intentions and hinders a comprehensive analysis of the broader policy context shaping rural youth's cultural production. This recognition guided a deeper policy analysis to address RQ1.

Through a coherent reading of policy documents spanning multiple years, a more robust understanding emerged: the notion of a 'Rural Digital Development Strategy'. Referenced repeatedly across various policy levels, this strategy underscores China's efforts to integrate digitalisation into rural development.

The introduction of the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' in the No.1 Central Document of 2018 marked a historical milestone in China's rural digitalisation journey. To comprehend this strategy, it is essential to contextualise the foundational developments that preceded it. Two critical factors—advancements in information and communication technology (ICT) and a growing emphasis on rural cultural subjectivity—laid the groundwork for this strategy.

Efforts to promote China's rural digital infrastructure can be traced back to the concept of 'rural informatisation', first introduced in the *No.1 Central Document* in 2006. The 2006 document emphasised the need to 'make full use of and integrate agricultural information resources, and strengthen information services such as radio, television, and telecommunications for rural areas' (MOA, 2006). This directive was further elaborated in 2007, with a focus on accelerating agricultural informatisation:

> The use of information technology and equipment is of great significance to accelerate the transformation of traditional agriculture. Improve the system of agricultural information collection and release, integrate agricultural information resources, and promote the standardisation of agricultural information data collection. Strengthen the construction of information service platforms, implement the 'golden farmer' project, and establish an interconnection centre of the national, provincial, municipal, and county-level agricultural information networks (MOA, 2007).

Over the next decade, ICT deployment expanded significantly, establishing a key outcome of rural informatisation. By 2020, the number of rural internet users had reached 309 million, constituting approximately 31.3 per cent of the nation's total internet users (CNNIC, 2021). This data underscores the penetration of ICT infrastructure in rural areas, enabling access to new media and fostering digital engagement. Leng et al. (2020) note that 'ICT adoption has a positive and statistically significant impact on rural household income diversification' (p. 3624), highlighting the role of ICT promotion as an infrastructural incentive to diversify rural income sources and reduce the risks associated with variable income due to natural conditions.

Nevertheless, critical voices highlight persistent challenges in rural informatisation. Uneven access and usage patterns reflect a persistent digital divide, affecting the effectiveness of relevant policies. Ting and Yi (2013) emphasise that, despite significant investments in ICT infrastructure in Guangdong, rural residents face barriers such as high service costs and a lack of locally relevant content. Moreover, inadequate funding for training programmes results in insufficient digital literacy, leaving rural populations unable to leverage the full potential of ICT tools. Similarly, Zhou, Gao, and Chimhowu (2019) argue that while ICTs can facilitate firm transformation, adoption among rural enterprises often depends on the availability of local expertise and education, which are frequently lacking. These disparities illustrate the digital divide, where infrastructure rollout fails to address socio-economic realities, producing superficial inclusion in the digital economy.

Rural subjectivity, another foundational pillar, reflects an important shift in policy narratives from 2006 onwards. The *No.1 Central Document* of 2006 emphasises rural cultural development and advocates increased investment in cultural resources and infrastructure:

> Finances at all levels should increase investment in rural cultural development [...] Develop cultural information resources sharing engineering rural grassroots service points, build a rural public cultural service system [...encourage] protection and development of excellent local and national characteristics. Traditional culture, the carrier and means of innovating rural cultural life, [should] guide cultural workers to go deep into the countryside, and meet the multi-level and multi -faceted spiritual and cultural needs of the farmers [...] Encourage farmers to establish a cultural industry (MOA, 2006).

These objectives moved beyond ideological education, emphasising the cultural benefits for rural communities (Xue and Mun, 2024). Moreover, they marked a transition from economic-centric approaches to a more integrated focus on cultural dimensions, further advanced in the subsequent 2007 document with the establishment of a rural public cultural service system:

> Increase investment in rural cultural undertakings, strengthen the construction of the rural public cultural service system, and accelerate the pace of the construction of the ‘village to village’ and the sharing project of rural cultural information resources. (MOA, 2007).

This transition from top-down dissemination to participatory cultural development represented a broader acknowledgement of rural culture's intrinsic value. In 2016, the concept of 'rural subjectivity' was introduced, advocating for farmers' central role in rural development (Qin, 2010). The document emphasised that 'adhering to the dominant position of farmers and improving farmers' wellbeing should be the starting point and goal of all rural work' (No.1 Central Document, 2016).

This participatory approach empowered rural communities to actively engage in cultural production, blending traditional values with modern entrepreneurship (Gao, 2022). These policies and technological advancements not only promote greater community participation but also strengthen rural identity and foster a sense of belonging, supported by strategic policy initiatives and enhanced public cultural services. Ultimately, these shifts illustrate a profound recognition of rural communities' potential as active agents of cultural innovation and socio-economic transformation, even amidst systemic challenges.

In contrast, the cultural use of instrumentalism (Scott, Rowe, and Pollock, 2016) may present challenges to the implementation of policy. Rural cultural policies often align more closely with national modernisation goals than with grassroots cultural needs, resulting in a top-down imposition of values (Macken-Walsh, 2012) that may not resonate with local populations. Looney (2015) discusses how China's 'New Socialist Countryside' initiative, exemplified by the Ganzhou Model[14], shifted from an initial emphasis on participation to a highly politicised, top-down campaign. This evolution marginalised local voices and prioritised bureaucratic objectives over community empowerment, reinforcing the disconnect between policy intentions and grassroots realities.

Moreover, while the concept of 'rural subjectivity' was formalised in 2016 with an explicit call to centre farmers' wellbeing in rural work, its implementation has faced substantial barriers. Xue, Mao, and Weeks (2020) highlight how rural reforms in China often adopt a campaign-style approach, focusing on short-term modernisation targets and efficiency

[14] The Ganzhou Model refers to a pilot initiative launched in Ganzhou, Jiangxi Province, during the early implementation of China's New Socialist Countryside policy in the mid-2000s. It was initially promoted as a participatory model of rural development combining infrastructural investment with local consultation. However, over time it evolved into a state-led, bureaucratically managed campaign focused on visible construction outcomes and political performance, rather than genuine grassroots participation (Looney, 2015).

metrics. Such an approach frequently sacrifices sustainable, equitable development and genuine participatory processes, leaving local communities with limited agency (Xue et al., 2020). Entrenched hierarchies within rural governance structures often marginalise local voices, rendering policies participatory in name only. This critique underscores the gap between policy intentions and outcomes, wherein cultural subjectivity remains constrained by broader systemic inequities.

Through the discussion above, it becomes evident that, prior to the transition to digitalisation, the intersection of ICT and rural cultural subjectivity revealed several tensions. The infrastructure-driven approach of ICT policies often lacked the cultural sensitivity required to align technological advancements with local needs and practices. Liu (2021) compares cultural consumption patterns between urban and rural residents in China, highlighting significant disparities in cultural investment and consumption capabilities. These disparities reflect the long-standing prioritisation of urban cultural policies over rural inclusivity. Consequently, this mismatch between the technological and cultural dimensions of rural development created a fragmented policy environment, complicating efforts to transition towards a cohesive digital strategy.

As digitalisation emerged as a policy priority in 2018, these unresolved issues risked being exacerbated. Without addressing the digital divide or genuinely empowering rural communities in cultural production, the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' risks reinforcing existing inequalities. Luo, Yang, and Wang (2023) note:

> Most rural areas lack sufficient internet infrastructure, experience unstable power supply, and lag behind in digital financial and e-commerce development. Additionally, a majority of rural residents lack basic financial and internet knowledge, which hampers their participation in inclusive digital finance. This leads to further difficulties in their lives and contributes to the widening digital divide (Luo et al., 2023, p. 6).

This critique underscores the challenges posed by inadequate digital infrastructure and limited digital literacy, which together hinder meaningful participation in the digital economy. Consequently, a two-tiered rural society emerges: one segment meaningfully participates in the digital economy, while the other remains excluded. These challenges emphasise the need for a thorough evaluation of the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy'.

It is essential to determine whether the strategy represents a genuine departure from earlier limitations or merely perpetuates existing patterns.

Issues of Rural Digital Development Strategy

After analysing the background of rural development prior to the digital era, I observed, when reviewing the *No.1 Central Document*, that the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' is a concept presented across various policy documents, with its content varying in each year's publication. To gain a comprehensive understanding and facilitate analysis of this policy concept, I compiled the key issues related to it as highlighted in the *No.1 Central Document* for the five years from 2018 to 2023, as presented in Table 3.

Policy Title, Published Governmental Body and Time	Key Issues Addressed
2018 No.1 Central Document *'Opinions on implementing the rural revitalisation strategy'*, by the State Council of the PRC (MOA, 2nd January 2018).	▪ The digital rural strategy was introduced for the first time. ▪ Highlighting the importance of integrating information and communication technologies (ICT) with rural agriculture, farmer-related products, and various applications and services. ▪ Utilising broadband and mobile communication networks to promote telemedicine and distance education, aiming to reduce the digital divide between urban and rural areas.
2019 No.1 Central Document *'Several opinions on adhering to the priority development of agriculture and rural areas and doing a good job in the work of agriculture, rural areas and farmers'*, by the State Council of the PRC (MOA, 3rd January 2019).	▪ Promoting the construction of the national digital agricultural and rural system of Internet + agriculture. ▪ Emphasis on the importance of developing rural e-commerce, reflected in the integration of e-commerce with agricultural product sales, and the entry of digital information into rural households. ▪ Relying on Internet+ to promote the extension of public services to rural areas.
2020 No.1 Central Document *'Directives on the key tasks for the issues of agriculture, countryside, and farmers to achieve the moderately prosperous society in all aspects'*, by CPC Central	▪ Improve rural logistics network (support agricultural product cooperatives and rural postal express companies). ▪ Build village-level e-commerce service centre

Committee and State Council of the PRC (MOA, 2nd January 2020).	▪ Cultivate the digital knowledge and skills of the rural workforce to improve and stabilise rural employment. ▪ Begin to promote rural data construction and accelerate the application of 5G in rural areas. ▪ Promote 'digital village' pilot programme.
2021 No.1 Central Document *'Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting Rural Revitalisation and Accelerating Agricultural and Rural Modernisation'*, by the State Council of the PRC (MOA, 4th January 2021).	▪ Implement the digital rural construction and development project, emphasising the simultaneous planning and construction of rural gigabit optical networks, 5G and cities. ▪ Develop smart agriculture and establish an agricultural and rural big data system. ▪ Strengthen digital and intelligent construction of rural public services, social governance, etc. ▪ Strengthen the construction of cultural and sports service facilities.
2022 No.1 Central Document *'Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting Key Works of Rural Revitalisation in 2022'*, by the State Council of the PRC (MOA, 4th January 2022).	▪ Promote digital rural construction. ▪ Promote the integration and application of information technology and agricultural machinery and agronomy. ▪ Strengthen farmers' digital literacy and skills training. ▪ Use digital technology to empower rural public services and promote the extension and coverage of 'Internet + government services' to rural areas. ▪ Expand agricultural and rural big data application scenarios, promote digital rural standardisation, and continue to carry out digital rural pilots.
2023 No.1 Central Document *'Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting Key Works of Rural Revitalisation in 2023'*, by the State Council of the PRC (MOA, 2nd January 2022).	▪ Deeply implement digital rural development actions and promote the research and development and promotion of digital application scenarios. ▪ Accelerate the application of big data in agriculture and rural areas and promote the development of smart agriculture. ▪ Implement cultural industry empowerment rural revitalisation plan. ▪ Deeply implement the 'digital commerce to promote agriculture' and 'Internet+' projects to bring agricultural products out of villages and into

	cities, encourage the development of agricultural products e-commerce direct purchase, customised production and other models, and build a live broadcast e-commerce base for agricultural and sideline products.

Table 3: Key policy issues related to the Rural Digital Development Strategy in the *No.1 Central Document* (policy documents reviewed and analysed by the author).

From the core issues summarised in the table, the foundation of China's rural digital strategy was laid down in the 2018 *No.1 Central Document*, where the 'Digital Rural Development Strategy' was formally proposed for the first time. According to the policy text, the description of this concept builds upon the prior development of information and technology network coverage in rural areas, and, for the first time, emphasises the development of characteristically rural information products and telemedicine. 'Bridging the urban–rural digital divide' is identified as the overarching goal or expected outcome of this strategy. By comparing rural policies before and after 2018, I contend that the initial introduction of this strategic concept did not alter the trajectory of existing rural policies, nor did it disrupt the established rural industrial structure. Rather, it represents a continuation of the rural informatisation policies emphasised in the previous phase, further laying the groundwork for the expansion of internet infrastructure to support the more comprehensive development of the rural digital economy in subsequent years.

Starting with the *No.1 Central Document* in 2019, the rural digital strategy gained further momentum, with particular emphasis on e-commerce development. The policy promoted the establishment of a national digital agricultural system through initiatives such as 'Internet + Agriculture,' which aimed to integrate digital tools into the sale of agricultural products and the provision of public services. This document marked a shift towards the practical application of digital technologies in rural households, laying the groundwork for the digital economy to assume a transformative role in rural life. The 'Internet + Agriculture' production model has generated debate, as its policy vision seeks to reform the country's traditional agricultural production system from the perspective of agricultural development (Ren, 2023). A more detailed focus on rural e-commerce indicates that business models leveraging media platforms are beginning to be encouraged in rural areas. During this period, the sale of agricultural products became closely integrated with mainstream e-commerce platforms, including short video platforms. According to a report on rural e-commerce via

short video platforms from the Institute of Agricultural Economics and Development (IAED):

> The short video platform helps directly connect the production and the consumer, enabling transactions without relying on middlemen with strong bargaining power. It reduces the price increases in the intermediate circulation links of agricultural products and helps increase the supply of high-quality agricultural products (IAED, 2022).

One of my participants recalled the development of agricultural product e-commerce as an epitome of policy guidance during this period:

> E-commerce on Taobao, Douyin and other platforms has become very popular in recent years. Mainly because the government has helped us connect to the internet, and it has become more and more convenient for everyone to use these platforms. Now selling agricultural products from personal stores on Taobao or Douyin has become a common practice. It is a very important part of our lives. I feel that compared with before, selling goods through multiple channels is indeed more efficient and makes more money. (SI-RYP-3, 15 May 2023)

By 2020, the strategy had expanded to encompass digital infrastructure improvements and workforce development. Policies aimed to enhance rural logistics networks and establish village-level e-commerce service centres to support the distribution of agricultural products. Furthermore, initiatives to improve the digital literacy of the rural workforce were introduced to stabilise employment and prepare rural residents for digital transformation. The policy also promoted rural data construction and piloted 5G applications in rural areas, signalling an increasing focus on smart technologies.

The 2021 policy advanced the strategy by emphasising the use of big data and smart agriculture. It proposed the establishment of a comprehensive agricultural and rural big data system to modernise farming practices. The concurrent development of rural gigabit optical networks and 5G infrastructure alongside urban areas demonstrated a clear intention to minimise the urban–rural digital divide. The 2021 policy also highlighted the importance of integrating digital tools into rural public services, governance, and cultural development, signalling a broader digital transformation agenda.

In 2022, the focus shifted towards expanding digital literacy and piloting digital villages. The policy underscored the need to train farmers in digital skills and to promote the integration of information technology with agricultural machinery. There remained a continued emphasis on applying digital technologies to public services, particularly through the extension of 'Internet + government services' into rural areas. Furthermore, the policy encouraged the expansion of agricultural and rural big data applications and advocated for the standardisation of digital rural development.

The 2023 policy concentrated on advanced digital applications and cultural empowerment. It called for deeper implementation of digital rural development initiatives, including the promotion of live-streaming e-commerce to support rural economies. The policy also highlighted the transformative potential of big data and smart agriculture in production, alongside efforts to promote rural culture through digital platforms. New models, such as direct purchasing and customised production of agricultural products, were introduced, further bridging the gap between urban consumers and rural producers.

Moreover, the evolution of terminology—from 'information and communication technology' to 'internet and e-commerce', and subsequently to 'live-streaming of goods'—reflects the vertical expansion of digital development initiatives. The scope of policy content now encompasses the entire rural agricultural production process: the integration of digital technology with agricultural machinery and agronomy, the application of rural big data and smart agriculture in production, the enhancement of farmers' digital literacy and skills, the facilitation of platform-based agricultural marketing, and the support provided by rural logistics companies in e-commerce sales. The 'digital rural pilot' serves as a practical example of these progressive steps.

As noted in the previous section, the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy', proposed in the *No. 1 Central Document* in 2018, did not emerge in isolation; it builds upon rural policies that have emphasised rural informatisation and rural cultural subjectivity since 2006. These early policies laid the groundwork for digitalisation, focusing primarily on expanding ICT infrastructure and promoting rural cultural initiatives. Examining policy texts from 2018 to 2023, both continuity and change are evident in the shift from rural informatisation to digital rural development. On the one hand, the digital rural strategy continues the long-standing objective of integrating technology into rural areas to improve productivity and reduce the urban–rural divide; on the other hand, it introduces a focus on more sophisticated digital

tools, including big data, smart agriculture, and digital literacy programmes, which differ markedly from the infrastructure-driven approach of earlier years.

This continuity is apparent in the sustained emphasis on connectivity and the provision of public services through digital means. Policies during the 2018–2023 period repeatedly stressed the expansion of rural broadband networks, the promotion of rural e-commerce, and the enhancement of online public service coverage. These initiatives reflect the objectives of earlier informatisation efforts, which aimed to improve rural information access and service provision. For instance, the agricultural 'Internet +' strategy launched in 2019 echoes the 2007 'Golden Farmer Plan', which sought to integrate agricultural information services across national, provincial, and local levels.

However, the positioning of digital tools within rural policy has changed significantly. Recent policies prioritise smart agriculture, big data applications, and the digital empowerment of rural residents. These developments signify a shift from merely deploying infrastructure to fostering digital literacy and enabling rural participation in the digital economy. For example, the 2021 policy went beyond infrastructure construction to emphasise the establishment of a comprehensive agricultural and rural big data system, representing a deeper integration of technology into rural governance and agricultural practices and marking a progression beyond the foundational ICT-led policies of the past.

Despite these advances, I contend that policy content has not sufficiently addressed the socio-economic disparities that hinder rural communities from participating in digital initiatives during the transition to digital rural development. Prior to the digitalisation era, rural policies centred on infrastructure-driven ICT initiatives. These initiatives often prioritised technological expansion over cultural sensitivity, resulting in a mismatch between digital tools and local needs. Policies such as the 'Golden Farmer Project' aimed to increase rural access to information technology but did not adequately consider the diverse socio-cultural contexts of rural communities. Liu et al. (2021) note that urban areas received more targeted cultural investments, while rural areas were marginalised, creating a fragmented policy environment that complicated the transition to digital strategies. This misalignment between infrastructure and cultural dimensions hindered the long-term impact of ICT policies in rural areas. The Rural Digital Development Strategy, introduced in 2018, sought to address these limitations by promoting broadband networks, digital literacy, and rural e-commerce. However, unresolved challenges, including the digital divide, remain evident. Luo, Yang, and Wang (2023) emphasise that rural areas still face unstable internet

connections, inadequate power supplies, and limited access to digital finance. Moreover, rural residents often lack the financial and digital knowledge required to participate fully in digital markets. This limited digital inclusion continues to represent a persistent inequality that is not explicitly addressed in policy documents and is difficult to resolve.

The persistence of regional disparities in digital access and deficits in digital literacy underscores the need for targeted policy interventions. Wang et al. (2023) emphasise that imperfect digital infrastructure and low rural digital literacy are key barriers to realising the full potential of digital empowerment in rural areas. They argue that, while digital technology has helped bridge some urban–rural cultural gaps, significant challenges remain, particularly in terms of access to digital resources and the capacity of rural communities to utilise them effectively (p. 135). Their research highlights the necessity of strengthening rural digital infrastructure, improving talent support systems, and optimising digital content for rural audiences. Without addressing these disparities, digital policies risk exacerbating socio-economic inequalities rather than mitigating them. Moreover, digital infrastructure development in China varies significantly across regions, with wealthier eastern provinces benefiting more from digitalisation than central and western areas (Xie and Zhang, 2024). These structural disparities underscore the challenges of achieving a balanced digital transformation in rural China. These structural interventions to prevent digital policies from exacerbating, rather than alleviating, socio-economic inequalities are currently absent from the 2018–2023 policy analysis, which may cause the challenge to equitable equitable distribution of digital infrastructure investments and the promotion of sustainable, inclusive digital transformation in rural areas.

Another limitation is that policy texts continue to rely on top-down governance structures to implement digital initiatives. Given the influence of digital platforms on rural youth lifestyles, the driving force of rural cultural production has shifted from a purely top-down, policy-driven model to a hybrid model shaped by both policy and technological factors. This transformation will be analysed in detail in Section 3 of this chapter. Policymakers may be slow to respond to this evolving dynamic, as reflected in the continued prioritisation of bureaucratic achievements over local needs (Zhang et al., 2023). Consequently, rural residents have limited opportunities to participate in the development of digital initiatives that directly affect their lives, exacerbating the disconnect between policy design and implementation and reducing the effectiveness of digital strategies in empowering rural communities.

The integration of digital technology into rural development has been emphasised extensively in the *No. 1 Central Document* since 2018. However, a closer examination reveals that, while substantial attention is given to digitalising agricultural production, e-commerce, and live streaming, comparatively less emphasis is placed on developing rural digital culture. To explore evidence of policymakers' guidance and planning for rural digital culture, as discussed in interviews with RYPs, I reviewed the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)* issued by ten departments, including the Central Cyberspace Administration of China. The concept of digital culture appears only in the section titled 'Creating a Strong Position for Rural Internet Culture', which specifies the promotion of 'Core Socialist Values' and traditional Chinese culture. This section also outlines the regulation of online content, including the prohibition of harmful information and the encouragement of high-quality audiovisual programmes focused on agriculture, rural areas, and farmers:

> Strengthen the construction of rural network civilisation and vigorously promote the 'Core Socialist Values' and the excellent traditional Chinese culture. Increase support for online audiovisual programmes on 'agriculture, rural areas and farmers' and enhance the supply of high-quality content resources. Standardise internet religious information services and carry out publicity and popularisation of laws, regulations, and policies involving religion in rural areas through the internet. Curb the spread of harmful online information in rural areas and strengthen education on preventing harmful information for rural children and adolescents. (MOA, 2022b, p. 11)

In policy texts, the term 'Core Socialist Values'—prosperity, democracy, civility, and harmony at the national level; freedom, equality, justice, and the rule of law at the societal level; and patriotism, dedication, integrity, and friendship at the individual level—serves as the ideological backbone of cultural governance in China. These values are deeply rooted in traditional Chinese culture, which encompasses Confucian (儒, *ru*) principles of benevolence (仁, *ren*) and propriety (礼, *li*), alongside Taoist (道, *dao*) ideals of harmony and balance (Shi, 2020). Song (2021) argues that these values are not only an extension of traditional Chinese culture but also a modernisation of these concepts to align with contemporary political and societal goals. From a policy perspective, the emphasis on 'Core Socialist Values' and 'China's Excellent Traditional Culture' in rural digital development reflects an intent to integrate governance with cultural revitalisation. This aligns with the

broader objectives of the *Rural Revitalisation Strategy,* which envisions rural groups demonstrating cultural literacy by 'skillfully applying various network platforms' and preserving 'some excellent cultures' (Song, 2021, p. 135). However, as noted by Ke (2022), the effectiveness of this approach depends on nuanced implementation that respects the complexities of local contexts. Successful integration would require tailoring content to address specific rural issues, such as generational shifts in values or the impact of economic modernisation on traditional practices.

As the most relevant target group and primary producers under the above-mentioned policies, the short video production of RYPs has highlighted the gap between the idealised rural cultural framework and both rural realities and individual production experiences. Specifically, RYPs face difficulties aligning their content with macro-level directives, which often conflict with the authentic, sometimes less idealised, stories of rural life they wish to portray (Fu and Li, 2022). One participant (SI-RYP-2) expressed this tension during an interview, noting that the 'correct' values promoted by policy often lack specificity and resonance with the realities of rural storytelling:

> This does not mean that the policy direction will definitely be beneficial to our content creation. This thing still needs to be looked at. Just like the correct values we talk about, they are not targeted at a certain rural content. The so-called correct values propagandised by the policy are aimed at the whole of China. Sometimes we cannot capture those macro values that are strongly related to rural areas, and it is difficult to produce high-quality short videos in this case. (SI-RYP-2, 28 April 2023)

Similarly, Participant 9 highlighted the challenge of balancing authentic representations with policy-aligned content, expressing a preference for documenting 'real' rural life, even if it includes less flattering aspects, such as outdated customs or local conflicts.

> In fact, those parents who are short-sighted may have some backward concepts or bad habits. But that is the most real, and it can very well reflect the story of our rural areas. For example, I took photos of bride prices[15]. Many of the stories

[15] Bride price refers to the traditional practice in which a groom's family provides monetary or material gifts to the bride's family as a prerequisite for marriage. In rural China, this practice has historically been deeply embedded in the

> revolve around the conflicts caused by wedding gifts in rural areas, but in the final analysis, that may not be a very positive spiritual quality. (SI-RYP-9, 28 August 2023)

From the above description of cultural content values by RYPs, it is evident that they perceive the macro-cultural policy orientation. However, challenges arise in the interaction between the 'excellent culture' envisioned by policymakers and the 'good content' defined by RYPs. Participant 2's reflections on 'correct values' indicate that the core values promoted by policy are overly macroscopic. In other words, when RYPs perceive and accept values or 'excellent culture' guided by national policies, they often attempt to integrate these with the local rural context. This process of selection and adaptation does not always result in high-quality rural short videos as recognised by RYPs.

To conclude the findings of this section, the evolution of China's 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' from 2018 to 2023 demonstrates the increasing integration of digital technologies into agricultural production, rural governance, and public services, with particular emphasis on e-commerce development. Policies such as the promotion of 'Internet + Agriculture' and rural live-streaming platforms reflect efforts to improve rural livelihoods by connecting producers directly with consumers. However, while these policies have advanced rural productivity and economic integration, they place comparatively less emphasis on cultivating an inclusive and authentic rural digital culture. Instead, policy texts, such as the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)*, prioritise ideological goals—including 'Core Socialist Values' and traditional Chinese culture—through digital media, without fully addressing the complexities of grassroots cultural production.

This creates a disconnect between top-down cultural directives and the lived realities of RYPs, who often aim to document everyday rural life through digital storytelling. As interviews with RYPs suggest, tension exists between their desire to portray authentic rural experiences—including less idealised aspects—and the policy emphasis on promoting 'correct' values. Platforms such as Douyin further complicate this dynamic, offering RYPs

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patrilineal family system, where the bride price signifies both an economic transaction and a cultural norm reinforcing gender roles. While some argue that the rising bride price empowers women by increasing their bargaining power in marriage, others highlight its restrictive effects, as it reinforces patriarchal expectations, commodifies women, and limits their autonomy by linking their value to financial transactions (Chen and Pan, 2023).

opportunities to share local stories and economic content while also functioning as a policy filter. Douyin enables grassroots content creation, yet requires creators to navigate policy-driven expectations, thereby shaping the presentation and consumption of rural digital culture. The next section explores how Douyin mediates this interaction, acting both as a platform for digital inclusion and a filter for implementing cultural policies in rural China.

Douyin as a Policy Filter

Political Engagement of the *New Farmer Plan*

The Douyin platform has emerged as a key space where national rural policies intersect with grassroots digital practices, particularly through initiatives such as the *New Farmer Plan*, which aligns closely with China's 'Rural Digital Development Strategy'. While policy texts provide top-down guidance, Douyin functions as a policy filter, translating broad national objectives into specific, actionable tasks for RYPs. Through content creation, these producers both engage with and reinterpret rural policy narratives, rendering Douyin an important conduit for policy implementation and a feedback mechanism for future policy development.

During interviews with RYPs, an important semi-open topic was addressed (see Section D of the Interview Guide in Appendix A). Related questions included: 'Are you aware of recent rural policies, such as the concept of rural digital development?' and 'Do you know how these policies support your use of the internet or content production on the platform?' Participants expressed limited awareness of specific national policies but a general understanding that the government supports rural communities. For example, Participant 1 stated:

> I don't know much about the specific policies of the central government, but I know that the government helps us rural people. Our lives have become better now, and there are more ways to make money (SI-RYP-1, 14 April 2023).

Similarly, Participant 8 noted:

> I don't know the specific policies, but I know that the country has been helping us (SI-RYP-8 @牛城可可, 13 August 2023).

These responses highlight a practical rather than formal understanding of policies, with rural creators perceiving government support through improvements in digital infrastructure and economic opportunities rather than through direct engagement with policy texts. Another participant provided slightly more detailed insights, reflecting awareness of broad policy themes. Participant 12 shared:

> My understanding of rural policies is first of all poverty alleviation, and then rural revitalisation. I feel that maybe the national policy is geared towards the construction of new rural areas. The specific measures are unclear (SI-RYP-12, 30 September 2023).

These findings indicate that RYPs are aware of the macro-level goals of rural policies, such as poverty alleviation and rural revitalisation, but there remains a disconnect between policy language and grassroots experiences. The challenge lies in communicating policy objectives in ways that resonate with rural communities, a gap that Douyin's platform initiatives, particularly the *New Farmer Plan*, help to bridge by functioning as a 'policy filter'.

The *New Farmer Plan* reflects the government's policy focus on cultivating 'new farmers' as part of China's *Rural Revitalisation Strategy*. The concept of new farmers is rooted in national policy, as outlined by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MOA). The 2020 MOA report introduced General Secretary Xi Jinping's statement:

> General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that it is necessary to cultivate more new professional farmers on the spot who love agriculture, understand technology, and are good at management. To implement the *Rural Revitalisation Strategy*, talent is the key. New professional farmers lead the rapid growth of cooperatives, family farms and other entities, and use new technologies, new services, and new channels to drive small farmers to share benefits (MOA, 2020b).

The erstwhile 'new professional farmers', later referred to as 'new farmers', are defined as 'a special group of people who have a natural affection for agriculture, the land, especially their homeland, and have the original intention of dedicating themselves to agriculture, revitalising the countryside, and helping farmers' (CPCNEWS, 3 July 2023). From these official reports, it is clear that the main body of new farmers is not composed of those specialising in traditional agriculture, but rather individuals possessing new technologies and

skills who are rooted in rural areas to serve local development. As a central force of China's *Rural Revitalisation Strategy*[16], this group has attracted considerable attention.

For example, the report *Youth of China in the New Era*[17] indicates that in 2021 approximately 470,000 young people participated in the grassroots implementation of the *Rural Revitalisation Strategy*, contributing to education, agriculture, health, and other sectors (GOV, 2022). Rural youth are regarded as playing a key role in promoting innovation, modernising cooperatives and enterprises, fostering agricultural science and technology, and expanding new business models (China Daily, 2023). These examples demonstrate that rural youth, as the primary group of new farmers, possess advantages such as mastery of new skills, higher education, and innovative thinking, which are critical for rural revitalisation. Therefore, naming Douyin's initiatives after the *New Farmer Plan* directly mirrors the policy objective, positioning the platform as an active participant in the government's 'Rural Digital Development Strategy'.

The alignment between Douyin's programme and national policies is further evidenced in the specific tasks outlined under the *New Farmer Plan*, which include traffic support, operational training, and monetisation guidance. In an official interview with *China Rural Finance Times*, Douyin's programme manager stated that the *New Farmer Plan* aims to:

> Promote the dissemination of 'rural' information to help poverty alleviation and rural revitalisation and will comprehensively support the creation of 'rural'

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[16] Chinese President Xi Jinping first introduced the Rural Revitalisation Strategy at the 19th Party Congress in 2017 to emphasise the importance of developing rural areas. The Rural Revitalisation Strategy' has two long-term goals: to achieve 'decisive progress on rural revitalisation' by 2035 and be 'fully rejuvenated with well-off farmers and strong agriculture sectors' by 2050. To achieve these goals, the Rural Revitalisation Strategy emphasises policies such as encouraging small-scale farmers to adopt modern farming and agricultural practices, improving the property rights of farmers, and requiring governments to repair environmental degradation, among many others.

17 'Youth of China in the New Era', known as 'White Paper on Youth' was published by the Chinese State Council Information Office in 2022 as the first nationwide official document focusing on its youth, recording achievements in the country's youth development in the new era and reflecting its spirit. The official document was issued on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the founding of the Communist Youth League of China (CYLC) under the Communist Party of China (CPC)'s leadership.

content in terms of traffic support, operational training, and monetisation guidance (Rural Finance Times, 2023).

To demonstrate the three aspects emphasised by the programme—traffic support, operational training, and monetisation guidance—I examined the webpage of Douyin's *New Farmer Plan* and synthesised information from the official poster and reports from various sources. This allowed me to summarise the specific measures under each aspect as follows:

Main contents of New Farmer Plan	**Specific tasks**
Traffic support	Providing a total of 1.2 billion traffic resources such as 100 million-level traffic flow resources and one million dou+ to provide support for rural areas through various activities such as 'registration gift packs', 'farmer scoreboards', 'new farmer recommendation officers', etc
Operational training	Launching multiple training courses to provide personalised courses for rural content creators at different stages. For junior creators, focusing on consolidating the necessary forms of content creation and improving the creators' creative ability and confidence; for intermediate and advanced creators, providing corresponding advanced courses. Specifically, these include: launching operation and promotion tips, short video hit rules, key elements of high-quality rural content, live streaming, etc.
Monetisation guidance	Providing rural creators who join the program with guidance on the use of commercial monetisation tools such as Douyin personal stores.

Table 4: Main contents of *New Farmer Plan* and its specific tasks (Source: analysed and summarised by the author).

The specific tasks outlined in the table above demonstrate the ongoing relationship between the *New Farmer Plan* and the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy'. Traffic support directly influences the visibility of rural short videos and addresses potential cold-start challenges—though these challenges persist for RYPs, as will be discussed in Chapter 5. Operational

training aligns with the policy directive 'Strengthening Farmers' Digital Literacy and Skills Training' in the 2022 *No.1 Central Document*. Personalised training at primary and intermediate levels is likely to attract more rural producers to engage with Douyin's short video production. Through these training programmes, rural producers—particularly rural youth as the primary participants—are expected to gain a deeper understanding of and better adapt to Douyin's media ecosystem.

Similarly, monetisation guidance, including instruction on operating personal shops, provides a concrete model for agricultural product digital markets, reflecting the approaches outlined in the 2023 *No.1 Central Document* ('Digital Commerce to Promote Agriculture' and 'Internet +'). These three components—traffic support, operational training, and monetisation guidance—clearly echo the policy objectives of the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy'.

Year-by-year analysis of the *No.1 Central Document* reveals that rural digital development policies have increasingly incorporated detailed provisions related to the internet, e-commerce, and digital infrastructure. Accordingly, the Douyin *New Farmer Plan* plays a demonstrative role, as popular rural short videos serve as a primary site for rural digital cultural production. If the long-term aim of the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)* is to 'cultivate a group of famous, high-quality, and distinctive rural e-commerce product brands' and to ensure that 'rural internet culture prospers and develops, and rural digital governance systems are increasingly improved,' then the production of rural short videos on Douyin can be understood as a crucial evidentiary platform for monitoring and informing future policy updates.

The *New Farmer Plan* as a policy 'filter'

The *New Farmer Plan* by Douyin illustrates the platform's active role in translating China's 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' policies into practical content creation opportunities for RYPs. As noted previously, Douyin's initiatives closely align with national policy objectives, including the promotion of digital literacy, rural e-commerce, and cultural revitalisation. An equally important aspect of this policy-filtering function is how Douyin engages RYPs and encourages them to produce content aligned with policy narratives. This two-way interaction (see Figure 8)—in which the platform both disseminates policy directives to rural communities and collects content from them for policymakers—

establishes a policy communication circuit that connects abstract national policies with grassroots realities through the production of rural short videos.

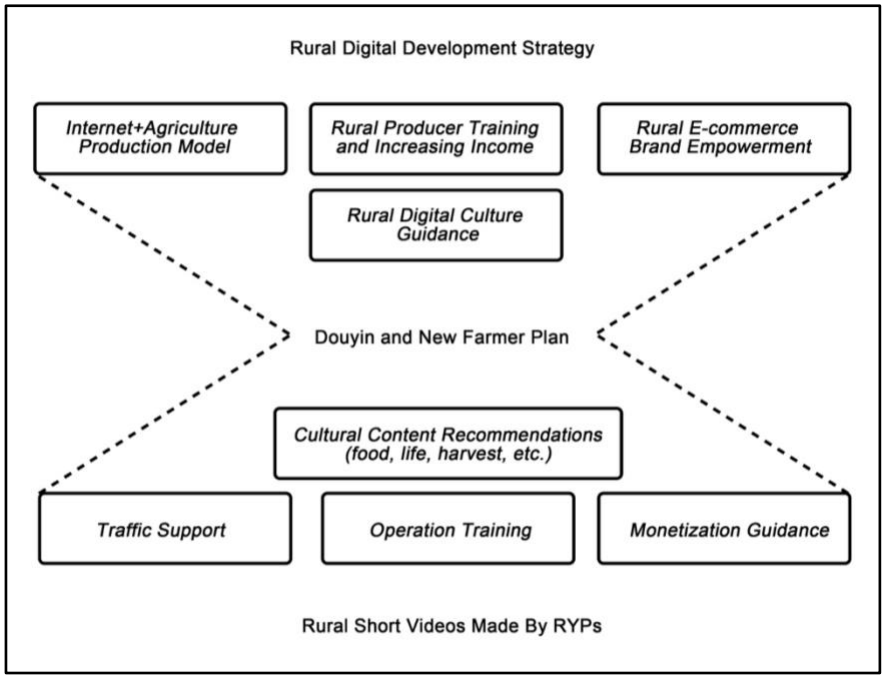

Figure 8: The policy filtering process of Douyin's *New Farmer Plan* (Source: designed by the author).

A clear example of Douyin's policy-filtering function can be observed in the thematic focus of the 2022 *New Farmer Plan*, which promoted rural short video content around three key themes: 'Food, Life, and Harvest' (Douyin, 2022). These themes were prominently displayed on the event's promotional webpage, reflecting the platform's preference for particular types of rural content. The event page's motivational language encourages RYPs to create videos aligned with these themes, suggesting that content related to rural food specialties, everyday life in rural areas, and agricultural harvests would receive prioritised traffic support. According to the event homepage, the three themes can be summarised as follows: 'Food' refers to rural specialties, 'Life' refers to life-related narrative stories occurring in rural areas, and 'Harvest' refers to the promising development prospects of rural agriculture (Douyin, 2022). Interviews with RYPs who participated in the *New Farmer Plan* indicate that these themes are accessible and engaging, resonating with their lived experiences. Participant 8 (@牛城可可) shared:

> I was mainly making short videos related to rural food. At the beginning, I wanted to promote rural food so that people outside our village would know about it and have the opportunity to taste it. It happened that the New Farmers

> Plan had this theme section at that time. I participated and got on the celebrity list (Participant 8 @牛城可可, 13 August 2023).

This statement highlights how Douyin's thematic focus aligns with rural producers' existing interests and motivations, facilitating their participation in policy-aligned content creation. Similarly, Participant 9 observed:

> Around the time of the Harvest Festival, I made a short video of harvesting wheat at home, and tagged it with the New Farmer Plan. The video went viral at that time. I think the content of the New Farmer Plan is quite relevant to our rural life, and there are some topics that are easy to participate in, because we usually plant or harvest (SI-RYP-9, 28 August. 2023).

This response illustrates how the themes of 'Food, Life, and Harvest' are closely connected to the everyday experiences of rural communities, making them natural storytelling points for RYPs. By promoting these specific themes, Douyin guides content production in a manner that resonates with rural realities while aligning with national policy objectives.

However, this thematic focus is not merely a reflection of grassroots interests but also embodies top-level policy ideologies. By encouraging content centred on rural food, life, and harvests, Douyin supports positive representations of rural areas, which aligns with the ideological goals of national rural cultural policies. For example, whether highlighting local cuisine or harvest scenes, these portrayals emphasise desirable aspects of rural life (Zhao, 2023). Reviewing the policy analysis of 'Core Socialist Values' and 'China's Excellent Traditional Culture' under the section 'Guiding Rural Digital Culture' in the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)*, as well as the cultivation of rural e-commerce brands in the *No.1 Central Documents*, suggests that these policy priorities aim to shape positive digital content that contributes to rural cultural revitalisation and supports the broader *Rural Revitalisation Strategy*.

A closer content analysis of the rural short videos reveals underlying moral narratives embedded in the 'Life' theme. Many videos under this theme focus on family values, community solidarity, and respect for tradition, all of which align with 'Core Socialist Values'. For instance, videos depicting family gatherings, traditional rural crafts, or local festivals frequently convey moral lessons about hard work, perseverance, and communal harmony. These narratives reflect policy-driven cultural goals, yet they are filtered through

Douyin's platform governance to make them more relatable and engaging for rural audiences. This finding is further explored in the thematic content analysis of rural short videos in Chapter 5.

The Douyin platform emerges as a crucial intermediary, functioning as a 'policy filter' that translates and disseminates national policies into actionable and comprehensible initiatives for rural communities. This approach may help address the gap in the application of rural information policy highlighted by Xia (2010). The *New Farmer Plan*, a major initiative by Douyin, exemplifies this role by focusing on themes such as 'Food, Life, and Harvest,' which align with national strategies while simultaneously making these strategies accessible and engaging for RYPs. The plan incorporates the national policy concept of 'new professional farmers', integrating it into its structure and objectives.

Specifically, Douyin mediates this interaction by serving both as a platform for digital inclusion and as a cultural policy filter. First, it provides RYPs with digital tools and training that enhance their capacity to participate in the digital economy. By reducing barriers to entry, Douyin fosters digital inclusion, enabling rural creators to share their stories and engage with wider audiences. This aligns with Ye and Yang's (2020) findings that digital platforms empower rural communities by addressing digital capability gaps and promoting social inclusion. Second, Douyin functions as a filter for implementing cultural governance by curating content that aligns with national narratives on rural revitalisation. The platform's promotion of themes such as 'Food, Life, and Harvest' reflects broader governmental aims to support rural culture, uphold traditional values, and promote e-commerce. Ren (2023) emphasises that digital platforms translate top-down policy narratives into practical grassroots activities that resonate with local realities. By encouraging content creation around these themes, Douyin not only amplifies rural voices but also shapes a positive and modern image of rural life, a key objective of cultural policy.

Furthermore, the *New Farmer Plan*'s support mechanisms—such as traffic support, operational training, and monetisation guidance—are essential for creating an ecosystem in which rural creators can thrive. This ecosystem generates feedback loops (Zhang et al., 2023), facilitating two-way communication between rural communities and policymakers. RYPs produce culturally relevant content that reflects their lived experiences, which policymakers can subsequently use as evidence to refine rural development strategies.

Therefore, the Douyin platform, through the *New Farmer Plan*, effectively bridges the gap between national rural digital development policies and their implementation at the grassroots level. This 'filtering' function transforms abstract policy directives into tangible, relatable activities that engage rural youth and enhance their digital participation. Consequently, Douyin not only facilitates the dissemination of national policies but also plays a pivotal role in the policy communication circuit (see Figure 5): the *New Farmer Plan* follows the national 'Rural Digital Development Strategy'; RYPs' rural short video production aligns with the platform's promotion; and national policymakers monitor the development of rural short video culture, collecting evidence on the current status of rural digital development. This dynamic interaction suggests that platforms such as Douyin are integral to the successful communication and implementation of rural policies, creating a more inclusive and participatory policy environment.

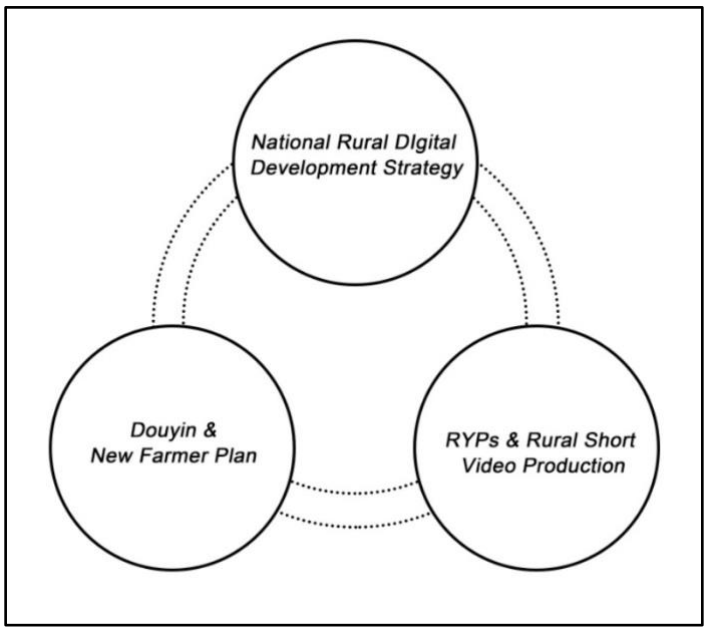

Figure 9: Policy communication circuit related to rural short video production (Source: designed by the author).

On Policy Impact – What is Broken

In examining the policy context surrounding RYPs' rural short video production, it is reasonable to argue that the Douyin platform functions as a mediating filter in the dissemination of policy discourse. Furthermore, once the policy communication circuit is established, it is important to consider its impact on the development of rural digital culture.

During my interviews, one participant responded to an open-ended question about the impact of producing Douyin short videos on rural lifestyles, stating:

> Since using Douyin, my previous lifestyle has been broken. There has never been such a big change before. I no longer focus all my energy on traditional farm work. At least I spend a large part of my time running my Douyin account (SI-RYP-11, 20 September 2023).

In this response, the participant attributes the disruption of his rural lifestyle directly to Douyin. This reflection prompted a re-examination of the relationship between national policies, the Douyin platform, and RYPs. From the perspective of policy influence, the question arises: what drives these unprecedented changes in the lives and cultural production of rural youth in the digital era? While the previously outlined policy communication circuit provides a foundational explanation, a deeper analysis must consider which rules or structures this circuit has transformed or 'broken'. This also raises questions about the role of multiple stakeholders—the state, the platform, and rural producers—and how their interactions shape not only governance but also the perceived 'authenticity' of rural digital culture.

Rural Cultural Governance Jointly Driven by Policy and Platform

Based on the finding that short video platforms—exemplified by Douyin—play a significant filtering role in the implementation of rural digital development strategies, I argue that the traditional top-down, policy-driven model of rural social and cultural governance has been disrupted. In its place, a hybrid governance dynamic has emerged, jointly shaped by cyclical policy processes and the influence of digital platforms.

Looking back at the evolution of China's rural policies, it is evident that before the digital era, rural development was predominantly guided by central macroeconomic policies and followed a top-down, policy-driven trajectory. For example, according to Ren (2023):

> In the era of planned economy, China's rural society was positioned by the state as a resource source for urban industrial capital accumulation. In order to serve the central government's overall policy orientation, a set of governance systems were designed and implemented [...]. In the early 1990s, the Chinese central government began to carry out market-oriented reforms and began to develop

> towards a socialist market economy. Driven by this macro-policy environment, the decollectivisation of rural agriculture and state support for rural industries became important aspects of rural governance during the reform period (p. 13).

Building on Ren's analysis, rural policies during the planned economy period were mandatory and reinforced urban-rural isolation. In other words, rural communities were governed primarily as agricultural producers. Although the market-oriented reform period allowed farmers to work in cities and diversify their production methods (Clark, 2012), there was still no significant shift towards empowering rural communities themselves. The top-down policy approach continued to dominate resource allocation, leaving rural governance under prolonged state control. In short, this policy-driven model lacked the intrinsic motivation necessary for local governance, particularly regarding cultural construction and social development. Ke (2021) emphasises that during the market-oriented reform period, policies promoting the introduction of urban culture into rural areas eroded rural cultural subjectivity. This contributed to a prolonged urban-rural dualism, fundamentally caused by unequal resource allocation and one-directional governance. These historical dynamics illustrate how rural governance has traditionally limited the agency of local actors, highlighting the significance of RYPs' negotiation of content and the role of platforms like Douyin as mediating agents in shaping both policy implementation and cultural expression.

I argue that this governance model began to shift in the digital era. The integration of digital platforms introduced bottom-up, participatory governance into rural cultural and social development. The emergence of rural e-commerce platforms such as Taobao and Douyin demonstrates that rural communities began adopting digital tools independently, often without initial policy guidance.

Evidence for this shift can be seen in the timeline differences between the emergence of rural e-commerce and the formulation of relevant policies within the national Rural Digital Development Strategy. Before the advent of the Douyin platform, China's earlier national e-commerce platform was Taobao.[18] According to a report from Alibaba, the owner of Taobao, as early as 2009 three 'Taobao Villages' had appeared in Hebei, Jiangsu, and

[18] Taobao is a Chinese online shopping platform. It is headquartered in Hangzhou and is owned by Alibaba. According to Alexa rank, it was the eighth most-visited website globally in 2021 (Alexa Internet, 2009). Taobao.com was registered on April 21, 2003 by Alibaba Cloud Computing (Beijing) Co., Ltd.

Zhejiang provinces (AliResearch, 2021). In other words, rural communities had already begun using Taobao to sell agricultural products well before the introduction of supporting government policies. By 2020, this number had exceeded 5,000. This timeline suggests that rural digital governance initially developed spontaneously, driven by the growing accessibility of communication technologies, expanding year by year without immediate policy backing. Policies supporting rural digital development and e-commerce only began to catch up around 2018.

Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest that during the preceding years (approximately 2009–2014), digital media platforms—rather than national policies—were the primary drivers of changes in governance models related to rural production. National policies subsequently focused on these transformed forms of rural production and used them as evidence for guiding rural digital development policy.

Although distinct from rural e-commerce, and lacking clear policy directives, this period also witnessed the emergence of rural youth culture on digital platforms. Examples include Tuwei culture (Zhou and Liu, 2021) and *Shehuiren* subculture[19] (Li, Tan, and Yang, 2020), which exhibited rural characteristics and developed on platforms such as Kuaishou and Douyin. Despite the absence of formal national policy guiding these cultural forms, digital platforms played a pivotal role in shaping and disseminating them. During this period, rural youth assumed the role of the 'unlikely creative class' (Lin and de Kloet, 2019), driving cultural innovation and experimentation in rural digital spaces.

While rural cultural governance is no longer solely determined by state policies and increasingly incorporates bottom-up dynamics facilitated by digital platforms, the government's intention to guide rural digital governance remains evident, underscoring the continued relevance of top-down influence.

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[19] The Shehuiren subculture (社会人亚文化) in China refers to a youth subculture that emerged online, characterised by a mix of rebellious street aesthetics, exaggerated fashion styles, and associations with gang-like imagery. The term 'Shehuiren' (literally 'society people') was originally used to describe individuals involved in underground or marginal social activities, but it has since evolved into an internet phenomenon, often satirised for its flashy clothing, tattoo-like stickers, and tough-guy posturing. The subculture reflects a mix of working-class identity, online meme culture, and performative rebellion, with influences from both Western hip-hop and local grassroots trends (Li, Tan, and Yang. 2020).

As mentioned earlier, national policy is no longer the sole force influencing social and cultural development in rural areas. This shift may be attributed to the fact that the collective consciousness of rural populations exists not only within policy texts and initiatives but increasingly on digital platforms (Gupta-Carlson, 2016). The Douyin platform, currently one of the most popular digital platforms in China, facilitates rapid circulation of information that rural youth wish to express, owing to its accessibility and high interactivity. Consequently, this rural 'collective consciousness exposure on digital platforms' (ibid.) can be understood as the sharing of rural life and the exchange of cultural content and opinions on Douyin, thereby creating a new channel for the dissemination of rural images.

However, the government recognises the importance of maintaining control over public opinion in these digital spaces. Its insistence on spreading 'positive energy' and promoting 'mainstream thought' reflects a commitment to guiding public discourse through digital platforms. A report from People's Daily Online states:

> General Secretary Xi Jinping profoundly pointed out: 'We are engaged in a great struggle with many new historical characteristics. We are facing unprecedented challenges and difficulties. We must persist in consolidating and strengthening mainstream thought and public opinion, carry forward the main theme, spread positive energy, and inspire the powerful force of the whole society to unite and forge ahead'; 'We must accelerate the development of media convergence so that mainstream media have strong communication, guidance, influence, and credibility'. (People's Daily Online, 29 January 2024)

From this statement, it is evident that the emphasis on the 'main theme', 'positive energy', and 'media convergence' reflects the guiding direction for digital culture that the central government seeks to enforce nationwide. The references to a 'great struggle with many new historical characteristics' and 'unprecedented challenges and difficulties' acknowledge the complexities introduced by rapid technological development, which complicate the state's efforts to control public opinion. The most direct evidence of the persistence of top-down policy influence is found in the promotion of 'Core Socialist Values' and 'China's Excellent

Traditional Culture' [20] in the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)*, principles that align with Xi Jinping's vision of cultural governance.

Through the production of dynamic storytelling on Douyin, the government seeks to encourage the creation of 'positive' cultural content reflecting rural life. This demonstrates that, while rural cultural governance is increasingly shaped by bottom-up digital engagement, top-down policy interventions remain significant, particularly in defining narrative frameworks on digital platforms. In summary, the ongoing evolution of rural cultural governance represents a dynamic interplay between top-down policies and bottom-up forces. The government continuously updates rural policies based on evidence collected from digital platforms, highlighting the reciprocal relationship between technology, governance, national security, economic prosperity, and social stability.

These findings and discussions emphasise the evolution of the driving forces behind rural cultural production. It should be noted that rural short video production is not driven solely by national policy or the Douyin platform. Applying the theoretical perspective of digital cultural politics to analyse how policies are translated into practice (Valtysson, 2022), the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy', the promotion of the Douyin platform, and the cultural production of RYPs correspond to the regulatory perspective, the institutional perspective, and the cultural production cycle from the user's standpoint, respectively. There is a degree of reciprocity between these elements within this cyclical driving-force structure (Hall, 1997), which is integrated into the production, consumption, identity formation, and governance of rural short videos.

Specifically, the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' seeks to ensure that policy-oriented rural short video content becomes visible and popular, as digitalisation and platformisation alone do not guarantee that diverse and original content reaches audiences. Douyin's potential lies primarily in 'the creation and storage of huge volumes of data' (Valtysson, 2022, p. 790). When rural policies and the Douyin platform are considered together, the

[20] An officially curated concept referring to the elements of China's pre-modern cultural heritage that are identified as embodying positive moral, philosophical, and aesthetic values. It is characterized by core ideas such as benevolence, justice, harmony, and the pursuit of the common good; virtues like filial piety and integrity; and a humanistic spirit. This construct is promoted in policy documents for its perceived utility in fostering cultural confidence, national identity, and moral education.

platform's mechanisms for filtering policies and promoting rural short video content create a space that facilitates a cycle of rural policy-making, dissemination, evidence collection, and policy updating. Furthermore, there is an additional dynamic within this space: the evolving norms of rural short videos as a cultural practice, shaped by the mutual influence of policies, platforms, and RYPs.

Further complicating the governance landscape, the relationship between the state, the platform and rural youth producers constitutes a multi-stakeholder ecology rather than a simple top-down chain. As Lu, Zhou, and Fan (2023) notes, digital platform governance in China must be understood as a quadrilateral field involving the state, platform companies, market forces and society (citizens/users) – not merely as corporate autonomy or regulatory oversight alone. In the context of rural short videos on Douyin, this means that the state issues broad policy goals (e.g., *Rural Revitalisation*, 'core socialist values'), the platform selects, incentivises and curates content through algorithmic and monetisation mechanisms, while RYPs produce material that must navigate both policy signals and audience demands. The result is that cultural production becomes a negotiated space: RYPs are neither fully independent nor merely passive implementers of state policy, but active participants in a mediated process of visibility, reward and interpretation.

The producers' pursuit of 'authenticity' in these rural short videos thus cannot simply be taken as a pure reflection of lived rural experience; rather, authenticity becomes a performative strategy negotiated within platform-state constraints and market logics. For example, while many rural video producers emphasise unfiltered daily labour or local dialects to signal 'rural authenticity', they also intentionally align with the themes promoted by the platform (such as 'Food, Life and Harvest') and with narratives that resonate with policy-approved values. In doing so, they calibrate what counts as authentic to maximise visibility and monetisation. This phenomenon resonates with scholarship on user-generated content in China, which argues that authenticity in digital media is often shaped by platform affordances and commercial incentives, not simply by grassroots spontaneity (Lin and de Kloet, 2019) Thus, the quest for authenticity has implications: it risks flattening rural difference into recognisable marketable tropes, and it indicates that rural identity is not just expressed but constructed under mediated conditions.

Finally, the evolving nature of rural governance in this digital environment suggests a hybrid governance model where distinct logics intersect: state policy logic, platform industrial logic, and local community logic. As the findings show, Douyin does not simply respond to state

regulation but are integrated into a 'state-company partnership' where it firms contribute to governance objectives (e.g., rural revitalisation, cultural tourism, e-commerce) while being governed themselves. Governance thus becomes less about state command and more about governance through intermediation, where visibility, algorithmic logic and production incentives form the infrastructure of control. For rural communities, this raises questions about whose interests are prioritised, how cultural distinctiveness is maintained and whether rural governance becomes more participatory or merely reconfigured under new modalities of control.

The Boundaries of Rural Culture

The second policy impact I wish to discuss is the erosion of rural cultural boundaries. Cultural boundaries are complex and often contested. Based on my review of China's rural policies and culture-related content on the Douyin platform, I argue that the notion of 'rural characteristics' in short video production is becoming increasingly ambiguous. While this discussion may seem premature prior to a detailed content analysis of rural short videos, it provides valuable policy insights by illustrating how rural digital culture evolves under top-down influences.

A significant issue is the role of social norms in shaping rural digital culture. In their assessment of social norms as an important component of subjective culture, Minkov, Blagoev, and Hofstede (2013) emphasise that social norms constitute a critical resource for the development of subjective culture. More broadly, social norms are a primary source of social order and are acquired through socialisation (Feld, 2002). I concur with this analysis of the 'social' dimensions of culture from a cultural anthropological perspective, as Chinese rural youth have internalised intragenerational values and behavioural patterns rooted in rural society (Graham-Brown, 1991), which constitute the foundation—or at least a critical component—of their cultural formation.

In other words, when considering rural short video culture, its originality and distinctiveness are often reflected in the norms of these rural societies. However, current national policy documents and Douyin's platform initiatives have influenced this construction of rural norms. To summarise, the norms and forms of rural cultural production are not entirely determined by RYPs themselves, but are shaped in part by external policy and platform-driven forces.

From a policy perspective, this influence is evident in the strong regulation of the values underpinning rural cultural products. Examination of policy documents indicates that the development of rural digital culture must conform to 'Core Socialist Values' and 'China's Excellent Traditional Culture'. In China's rural governance, tolerance for rural society deviating from these values appears limited, reflecting a certain 'tightness' characteristic of Chinese society and its approach to cultural governance (Gelfand, Nishii, and Raver, 2006). Although desk research on policy texts primarily identifies the promotion of mainstream cultural values rather than explicit suppression of non-compliant content, evidence from interviews with RYPs suggests that content discretion often stems from a fear of non-compliance:

> The national policy is good, but it prefers that we tell specific stories. You should understand that it is the positive side. (Participant 6 @二猪的故事, 21 July 2023)

> Of course we hope to make more positive videos, because I feel that if it does not comply with the country's guidance, then this video account will definitely fail, and it will not be allowed to be spread. (SI-RYP-11, 20 September 2023)

These quotations demonstrate that cultural production on Douyin is subject to platform supervision and influenced by the state's perception of value guidance. This reflects a degree of policy sensitivity: content creators are aware not only of what cultural content is promoted but also of what is permitted to be disseminated. Viewed through the lens of the cultural dimension of 'tightness versus looseness,' this highlights the differences between current rural digital culture and the mainstream cultural norms of Chinese society. This distinction does not necessarily indicate whether rural short video culture is individualistic or collectivistic, but rather the extent to which rural digital culture diverges from national mainstream norms.

Consequently, it can be tentatively predicted that, as policy communication interventions continue to narrow these cultural differences, rural digital culture may lose some of its distinctiveness. In other words, rural digital culture norms are increasingly likely to be shaped by, and incorporated into, mainstream social norms. This suggests that the blurring of rural cultural boundaries could become a prevailing trend under current and future cultural policy governance.

In addition to policy-driven cultural homogenisation, the operational model of the Douyin platform plays a critical role in shaping rural short video production. Douyin employs algorithms and regulatory mechanisms that effectively replace traditional media's exposure of rural culture or conventional distribution models for agricultural products. The promotion of specific themes and the revenue model of personal online agricultural product shops introduced through the *New Farmer Plan* have standardised rural short video content production. These initiatives indicate that the daily cultural production practices of RYPs, rooted in rural life, may be influenced by the platform's industrial production model, potentially reducing their 'vernacular creativity' (Burgess, 2007).

The platform's influence extends beyond content themes to the motivations behind rural short video production. Whether participating in the *New Farmer Plan* or responding to Douyin's traffic promotion mechanisms, the platform's complex digital intermediation and media ecology encourage RYPs to consider not only 'rural characteristics' but also broader communicative effects. During interviews, participants indicated that their platform choices were often guided by strategic considerations:

> Compared with other platforms, the monetisation aspect of Douyin is much greater. Then we are used to using Douyin, so we think Douyin is more convenient. Kuaishou or other platforms are also possible, but maybe we are already used to it. I use Douyin, so I think Douyin may be more convenient, and it has the largest traffic and the largest number of users, so its market is also the largest. (Participant 4 @晓毅班长, 23 June 2023)

This strategic behaviour demonstrates that, while rural short videos may reflect diverse rural cultures, they are heavily influenced by commercial motivations. Successful rural short videos attract millions of views not merely by appealing to a fixed audience, but by catering to fluid 'taste communities' (Lynch, 2018) or 'neo-tribes' (Maffesoli, 1996; Bennett, 1999). Consequently, the form of rural short video culture reflects both the rural identity embedded in the content and the complex digital intermediary processes shaping its visual and auditory style. The former influences the autonomous motivation of RYPs as rural cultural hosts, while the latter affects the diversity of rural digital culture.

Beyond blurring the boundaries and forms of rural digital culture, the Douyin platform also fosters creativity as a collector and distributor of data (Gawer, 2021). This platform-driven creativity is facilitated through what Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy (2021) term 'boundary

resources' (p. 66), which include technological features (see the review of Douyin's featured affordances in Chapter 2) such as music library, filters, and special effects—atomized and structured creative tools that users can integrate into their videos. Importantly, Douyin itself does not produce rural short video content; rather, it provides tools that enhance the creative process for RYPs and other users. In this context, the 'product' is not the platform's technology, but the cultural content generated by rural users.

The rural short video product comprises stories, imagery, and performances that reflect rural life, culture, and identity, created collaboratively by RYPs and their audiences. This interaction illustrates that creativity in rural short video production is not predetermined or dictated by the platform but emerges through the interplay of Douyin's boundary resources and the creative inputs of rural users. Therefore, the cultural product in this context is the rural short video itself, shaped jointly by the platform's modular creativity tools and the personal, cultural, and social expressions of RYPs. Douyin facilitates cultural production not by controlling content, but by enabling rural users to construct and share unique narratives, thereby producing a continuous flow of rural cultural products in the form of short videos. In this way, Douyin operates as an intermediary platform that provides boundary resources for rural users to transform their experiences into digital cultural products, rendering rural stories visible and accessible to wider audiences.

To conclude, the findings of this section highlight the ongoing transformation of rural cultural boundaries, driven by both policy interventions and the operational mechanisms of digital platforms such as Douyin. While rural short video production continues to reflect traditional norms rooted in rural communities, these norms are increasingly shaped by top-down national policies promoting 'Core Socialist Values' and by the industrial logic embedded in platform algorithms. Rural cultural governance is no longer solely policy-driven but is instead shaped by a dynamic interplay between government regulation and platform-mediated creativity. This evolving framework blurs the distinct characteristics of rural digital culture, as RYPs navigate both policy expectations and platform incentives. Ultimately, the convergence of national policies and digital platforms creates a hybrid space for rural cultural production—one that offers new opportunities for visibility while simultaneously challenging the preservation of cultural distinctiveness amid mainstream societal norms.

Conclusion

Since 2018, Chinese national rural cultural policies have significantly influenced the digital development of rural areas by integrating digital tools into governance, e-commerce, and cultural revitalisation. Simultaneously, the Douyin platform has emerged as a critical mediator, translating policy directives into practical initiatives for RYPs. Together, these forces have reshaped rural cultural production, marking a transition from traditional top-down governance to a participatory, multi-stakeholder model. This chapter demonstrates that the interaction between policy and platform has catalysed digital inclusion while introducing new challenges related to authenticity, cultural identity, and socio-economic disparities.

The 'Rural Digital Development Strategy', introduced in 2018, catalysed rural digital transformation by emphasising ICT deployment, smart agriculture, and digital literacy. These policies have facilitated economic and cultural opportunities while highlighting persistent barriers, such as unequal access to infrastructure and limited digital literacy among rural communities. Addressing these inequalities remains essential for achieving an inclusive digital future.

Douyin's *New Farmer Plan* exemplifies how the platform mediates these policies. By offering tools such as operational training, traffic support, and monetisation guidance, Douyin empowers RYPs to create content that aligns with both their lived realities and policy objectives. Its thematic focus on 'Food, Life, and Harvest' resonates deeply with rural life, creating accessible opportunities for content creation that amplify rural voices while promoting policy-driven narratives. However, this mediation introduces tensions. National policies often emphasise ideological goals, such as 'Core Socialist Values', which can conflict with RYPs' desire to portray the authentic and often less idealised realities of rural life. Additionally, Douyin's algorithm-driven logic favours commercially viable content, potentially leading to the homogenisation of rural digital culture.

In summary, these dynamics blur the boundaries of rural cultural identity, raising questions about how rural culture is defined and represented in the digital age. While the participatory nature of platforms such as Douyin creates opportunities for visibility and agency, it also complicates the preservation of cultural distinctiveness. The interaction between policies, platforms, and creators forms a hybrid governance model that both empowers rural

communities and constrains them within ideological and commercial frameworks. This interaction renders the short video production process of RYPs complex and challenging to interpret. To understand this process more clearly, the next phase of this research will examine the concrete manifestations of political and platform power in cultural production. Consequently, the following chapter will explore rural stories told in popular short videos from a bottom-up perspective.

Chapter Five: Evaluating Rural Short Video Contents

As this chapter draws on content analysis of rural short videos, it addresses RQ2: *What are the expressive forms of rural short videos, and how do rural youth producers construct the digital rural scene?* The discussion of findings is grounded in three interrelated perspectives. The first is the contextual review of rural youth lifestyles presented in Chapter 1, encompassing issues such as family structure, filial piety, land, and rural industrialisation. The second is the analysis of policies related to the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' in Chapter 4, particularly the interaction between policies, platforms, and producers that has given rise to a hybrid governance model for rural cultural production. The third perspective builds on the review of Douyin's affordances in Chapter 2, Section 1, including its interface design and creative tools, which shape the expressive possibilities available to rural youth producers. Integrating this perspective enables a more comprehensive understanding of how Douyin's technological and aesthetic affordances are embedded in the textual construction of the short videos analysed in this chapter. Taken together, these perspectives provide a holistic framework for interpreting rural short videos both as representations of contemporary rural youth lifestyles and as digital artefacts through which producers negotiate cultural subjectivity and rural public opinion within an evolving model of cultural governance.

This chapter presents the findings from the analysis of cultural content data. The primary data source is an online diary compiled over a three-month period, documenting observations from 300 rural short videos on Douyin under the hashtag *#RuralLife*. To understand the expressive forms of these videos, I employed thematic analysis focusing on two key dimensions recorded in the diary: actions/interactions and context. This approach

enabled the examination of elements such as narrative content, spatial settings, props, and character relationships. Four main themes were identified: *Rural Family Drama*, *Rural Sitcom*, *Rural Video Blog*, and *Rural Short Documentary*, each comprising multiple subthemes. The distribution of themes (Table 5) highlights the predominance of dramatized familial narratives, reflecting both the cultural centrality of kinship and the algorithmic appeal of emotionally charged content.

To present the findings, I first outline a taxonomy that classifies rural short videos according to how they mirror established television and social media genres. This classification also incorporates how the technological affordances of the Douyin platform in the short video production and dissemination process enable rural short videos to embody certain characteristics of traditional media genres, thereby facilitating the subsequent identification of short video themes. I then describe each theme in detail, paying particular attention to how video formats combine with core narrative concepts that symbolise contemporary rural culture. In discussing each theme, I include one representative case for comparison, supported by screenshots and descriptive notes as evidential material. Finally, I analyse the commonalities and differences across the themes to consider how rural short videos function as a medium for the dissemination of public opinion and to argue that such content constitutes a form of 'digital public rural sphere' that exists within the Douyin platform.

Theme	**N (%)**
Rural Family Drama	**117 (39%)**
Reciprocal Filial Piety	68 (58.1%)
Responsibilities & Cohesion	49 (41.9%)
Rural Sitcom	**86 (28.7%)**
Expressions of Trust	49 (57%)
Rural Festival	37 (43%)
Rural Video Blog	**45 (15%)**
Factual Reality Talking	38 (84%)
Non-verbal Reality	7 (16%)
Rural Short Documentary	**49 (16.3%)**
Observational Documentary	26 (53%)
Participatory Documentary	23 (47%)
Others	**3 (1%)**

Table 5: Themes and subthemes in #Rurallife videos on Douyin (*N*=300) (source: author). Percentage of main themes (bold) refers to the proportion of videos within the full sample. Percentage of subthemes refers to proportion of videos within the main theme.

Top-Line Genre Classification

In this study, the thematic analysis of rural short videos is closely informed by traditional media genre frameworks. These genres provide a structured lens through which the content, style, and storytelling practices of RYPs can be categorised and interpreted. Drawing on established definitions and characteristics of media genres, this section provides an overview of the primary genres of rural short videos produced by Rural Youth Producers (RYPs) on Douyin, offering a framework for the detailed thematic analysis in the next section.

Importantly, these expressive forms are not merely cultural reinterpretations of traditional genres but are also shaped by Douyin's platform-specific affordances. Features reviewed in Chapter 2 such as the vertically oriented interface, integrated editing tools, and algorithmic recommendation system influence video length, pacing, visual framing, and audience engagement. Consequently, the ways rural youth producers adapt drama, sitcom, vlog, and documentary forms are intertwined with the technological and social logics of the Douyin platform.

Firstly, 'drama' is a distinctive literary form characterised by its focus on action, performance, and audience engagement. It is written to be performed rather than read, relying on live actors and theatrical elements to convey emotion and meaning, making it inherently experiential (Watson, 1983). It also combines multiple art forms—such as literature, music, and visual expression—to present a holistic representation of life's conflicts and emotions (Shu-qin, 2011). Moreover, drama employs dialogue and action as its principal tools, constructing narratives around human struggles and resolutions, which are amplified through live performance (Hirsch, 1965).

I found that rural short videos on Douyin represent a modern adaptation of the traditional category of drama, blending classical themes with the immediacy and interactivity of digital media. Like traditional dramas, these videos focus on universal themes such as family dynamics, reciprocal filial piety, responsibility, and cohesion—values that collectively reflect shared cultural ideals in a contemporary form (Yeh, 2023). They employ storytelling techniques reminiscent of traditional performance arts, combining dialogue, visual cues, and narrative arcs to evoke emotional resonance and moral reflection (Carroll and Cameron, 2009). The participatory nature of Douyin further enhances this adaptation by allowing viewers to engage through comments, shares, and likes, thereby strengthening the dialogic

aspect of these videos. This interaction enables audiences to express emotional responses and co-construct narratives of filial piety and family cohesion, mirroring the interactive role of audiences in traditional drama within a digitally mediated environment (Schmieder and Wierzbicki, 2012). Furthermore, these videos act as digital carriers of cultural heritage (Xue, 2022), preserving rural narratives and values in a format that is both accessible and relatable to a broader, more diverse audience. By integrating the thematic depth of traditional drama with the communicative reach of digital platforms, these videos emerge as new manifestations of classical storytelling in the digital age.

Secondly, 'sitcoms', or situation comedies, are characterised by their closed, circular narrative structure, which resets at the end of each episode to maintain a consistent comedic environment (Klika, 2016). These shows rely on humour derived from relatable, everyday scenarios and consistent character dynamics, fostering audience identification and engagement (ibid.). Additionally, sitcoms employ humour techniques such as incongruity and superiority, which resonate universally while reflecting the socio-cultural context of their production (Juckel, Bellman, and Varan, 2016). Some rural short videos on Douyin represent an evolution of the traditional sitcom genre, blending humour, character-driven storytelling, and cultural relatability with the interactive affordances of short video platforms. These videos frequently centre on recurring characters and familiar rural settings—such as village festivals or everyday expressions of familial trust—similar to how sitcoms use ensemble casts and routine scenarios to build viewer engagement (Juckel, Bellman, and Varan, 2016).

However, a key distinction lies in the performance style: unlike professionally produced sitcoms, many Douyin creators use friends, neighbours, and family members as actors. This use of amateur performers introduces a layer of authenticity that heightens the viewer's sense of intimacy and realism, while simultaneously producing a stylised portrayal of rural life that still acknowledges its performative construction. Douyin's template-based video editing and trending 'challenge' functions encourage serialised humour and replication, fostering the cyclical storytelling patterns reminiscent of sitcoms. The interplay between artificiality and authenticity becomes central to the genre's appeal, as these videos oscillate between sincere representation and deliberate staging, offering both emotional familiarity and subtle critique of mainstream media formats.

Moreover, Douyin amplifies this genre's participatory nature, allowing viewers to engage directly through likes, comments, and shares, thereby creating an interactive feedback loop

that enhances relatability and communal experience (Fan, 2023; Lin, 2023). By integrating rural traditions with modern storytelling techniques, these videos preserve cultural narratives while leveraging digital innovation to engage a wider audience.

Thirdly, 'video blogs' (vlogs) are a dynamic form of digital communication characterised by visual storytelling, personal expression, and audience engagement. They blend multimedia elements, such as video, audio, and text, to create rich, relatable narratives, often functioning as personal diaries or platforms for identity expression (Griffith and Papacharissi, 2009). Vlogs emphasise interactivity, allowing creators to engage directly with their audiences through comments and feedback, fostering intimate and community-driven communication (Warmbrodt et al., 2010). Additionally, vlogs provide a platform for self-presentation and creative exploration, often driven by user-generated content and stylistic freedom, making them versatile tools for both personal and commercial expression (Sergeeva and Doroschuk, 2021). On Douyin, several short videos blend personalised storytelling, visual authenticity, and interactive elements to reflect real-life rural experiences. These videos emphasise factual reality by presenting unfiltered depictions of daily life and cultural practices in rural areas, aligning with the vlog's hallmark focus on authenticity and relatability (Zhou and Teng, 2023). These vlogs benefit from Douyin's creative affordances, such as in-app filters, text overlays, and music selection, which allow rural youth producers to balance authenticity with visually engaging content. The platform's low barrier to production and direct audience feedback loops also enable nuanced self-presentation, reinforcing the vlog's intimate and participatory qualities.

Non-verbal elements, such as scenic visuals and real-life tasks, enhance narrative depth, fostering an emotional connection with audiences and mirroring the personalised approach of traditional vlogs (Weng and Liu, 2022). Furthermore, these videos act as cultural bridges, engaging urban audiences with rural realities and facilitating meaningful social dialogue, akin to the community-building attributes of vlogging (Zou, 2022). By incorporating elements of both factual and non-verbal reality, this type of rural short video expands the narrative of rural public opinion and has the potential to bridge the urban–rural divide (Yu, 2023) in rural youth's public opinion engagement.

Finally, 'documentary' constitutes a diverse genre of filmmaking characterised by their focus on representing reality and exploring factual narratives. Observational documentaries aim to present an unfiltered depiction of events, relying on the filmmaker's unobtrusive presence to capture reality as it unfolds, often drawing on techniques from direct cinema and

naturalistic observation (Odagiri, 2020). In contrast, participatory documentaries emphasise the active engagement of filmmakers with their subjects, showcasing the interaction and influence of the filmmaking process on the narrative, and often giving participants a voice and co-authorship in storytelling (Tarrant, 2008). Both forms utilise the documentary medium to create a dialogue between filmmaker and reality, offering nuanced perspectives that encourage reflection on social, cultural, or historical issues. In the context of rural short videos, a distinct category emerges for content that employs an observational style, capturing unfiltered scenes of rural customs and daily life, aligning with the documentary tradition of presenting reality as it unfolds (Odagiri, 2020). Simultaneously, within this category, some short videos incorporate participatory elements, allowing producers and actors to actively interact with the rural scenes depicted, promoting a form of co-storytelling that reflects the spirit of participatory documentary (Tarrant, 2008). Douyin's short-duration format, vertical framing, and integrated editing tools encourage condensed, micro-narratives that preserve the immediacy of reality while allowing creative staging. These affordances facilitate a hybrid documentary form in which observational authenticity coexists with interactive and participatory elements, reflecting the platform's influence on narrative construction.

These hybrid genres illustrate what Nieborg and Poell (2018) term the 'platformisation of cultural production', in which traditional media logics are reconfigured through platform-specific affordances and business imperatives. On Douyin, this platformisation manifests through the algorithmic privileging of replicable, emotionally engaging, and visually concise content, leading to the rearticulation of classical genres in ways that align with the platform's attention-driven economy.

Identifying the Themes

This section provides a detailed exploration of each thematic category, presenting specific examples and examining narrative techniques, production styles, and cultural significance. The discussion of each theme illustrates how the genres outlined above are adapted and contextualised within rural short videos, offering insights into the creative practices and socio-political influences that shape these narratives.

Across the following four thematic categories, recurring creative strategies emerge from Douyin's core affordances. Text overlays, stickers, and background music are used universally to accentuate emotion, rhythm, and humour, while editing tools such as jump

cuts and filters enhance visual dynamism and narrative clarity. Rather than repeating these shared techniques in every section, this analysis highlights their distinctive narrative and social applications within each genre. For instance, in family dramas they generate emotional empathy; in sitcoms they amplify collective humour; in vlogs they support self-expression; and in documentaries they aestheticise everyday rural life. This structure allows for both the recognition of common aesthetic logics and the identification of genre-specific innovations.

Theme 1: Rural Family Drama

Theme Description: The largest thematic category identified in this study is *Rural Family Drama* (N=117), in which short videos centre on the internal narratives of rural families with clearly defined storylines. The stage settings of these videos are typically rural family spaces, such as courtyards, kitchens, and village homes, with narratives performed by one or more family members. These videos depict everyday family life, focusing on relationships between parents and children, as well as interactions among siblings and peers.

Videos within this category represent the largest proportion of the dataset (117/300). Analysis indicates that these short videos exhibit clear storytelling attributes, including well-defined characters, distinct locations, and specific events that require resolution. The content predominantly reflects the presentation and negotiation of family relationships. I argue that this category can be classified as Rural Family Drama on Douyin, following Effendi, Malihah, and Nurbayani (2016), given its emphasis on character-driven narratives and its central focus on everyday family life.

These narrative and visual conventions are not only culturally embedded but also shaped by Douyin's platform affordances. The vertically oriented interface, in-app editing tools, and algorithmic recommendation system influence how rural youth producers structure stories, select scenes, and engage viewers, creating narratives optimized for short, attention-driven consumption.

Within this category, I identified two sub-themes: intergenerational relationships and peer relationships, operationalised as *Reciprocal Filial Piety* (N=68) and *Responsibilities and Cohesion* (N=49). The following discussion examines the characteristics of these sub-themes and considers how the videos collectively present the lived realities of rural family life, explicitly linking content construction to Douyin's affordances.

#Reciprocal Filial Piety

Throughout the fieldwork, the majority of videos (N=68) incorporated filial piety discourse through storytelling. 'Filial piety', a fundamental value in Confucian cultural societies, refers to the duty of children to respect, care for, love, and obey their parents (He and van Heugten, 2020). Although concern and care for parents are common in many cultures, Sun (2017) elevates filial piety to a quasi-ontological level, arguing that it profoundly shapes family and social relations in Confucian societies. The analysis of the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)* in Chapter 4 also emphasises how this Confucian value has become a key ideological basis for 'Core Socialist Values'.

My analysis found that rural youth's care for the elderly in these videos exemplifies filial piety, particularly through companionship and financial assistance. Studies on filial piety in rural China highlight two perspectives: the needs of the elderly and the challenges of eldercare posed for rural migrant workers (Wen, 2017). Given its cultural and historical significance, RYPs employ filial piety to interpret and represent relationships between children and parents, providing a lens through which contemporary rural family dynamics can be understood.

In the analysed videos, intergenerational relationships, such as those between children and parents or grandchildren and grandparents, are central. For example, one video (No. 23) documented in the fieldwork diary (Figure 10) depicts an elderly father living with his sister-in-law, who bullies him. The sister-in-law's negative portrayal as unfilial is sharply contrasted with the younger brother's positive image of filial devotion. This narrative reinforces traditional moral dichotomies and revisits the theme of parental sacrifice, aligning with He et al.'s (2021) analysis of how filial piety is constructed through memories of hardship and devotion. Rather than functioning as a didactic or analytical text, the video operates within an emotionally driven, dramatized format. It implicitly communicates values of love, reciprocity, and gratitude by juxtaposing the parents' past labour with their present neglect. This storytelling approach evokes empathy and reinforces moral expectations around caring for the elderly, particularly within the context of evolving rural family dynamics.

Title: Sister-in-Law is Silent at Last

Description Note: The video depicts an elderly father living with his sister-in-law. One day, while the father is resting after ploughing the field, the sister-in-law angrily pushes him down upon discovering his pause. This incident is witnessed by the younger brother, who confronts the sister-in-law, slaps her, and reminds her of the parents' sacrifices and kindness. Following a heated argument, the younger brother decides to take the elderly father to live with him. In the conclusion, the sister-in-law, overwhelmed by shame, remains silent.

Figure 10: Screenshots and notes of the video (no.23), exemplary Reciprocal Filial Piety by @工厂源头供应链 (2022).

These narratives are further enhanced by Douyin-specific functions, including emotive soundtracks, minimal visual effects, and text overlays, which amplify the affective and moral dimensions of family storytelling. Through my browsing, RYPs strategically use platform features to reinforce meaning: adding subtitles to highlight moral contrasts and guiding viewers' interpretations of characters' actions; inserting background music—such as the song *Father* in Video No. 23—to reinforce the emotional tone and evoke empathy and moral reflection; using minimal visual effects to preserve authenticity; and applying slow-motion effect to emphasise key moments of intergenerational care. Additionally, comments and shares extend the dialogue beyond the video, allowing viewers to engage with and discuss moral messages.

Additional examples include a video (No. 34) by @乡村兄妹, which illustrates filial piety through consistently positive depictions of returning home to care for parents. Similarly, @乡村人安琪's video (No. 17) employs a third-person perspective to document a visit to her grandmother's house during Chinese New Year, narrating the parents' labour and expressing gratitude. Producers in these videos use split-screen effects to show parallel actions of multiple family members, while temporal filters and text captions emphasize effort and care. Background music cues support emotional engagement and guide interpretation of filial gestures, while the algorithm amplifies content with clear moral narratives.

In addition to the production characteristics of this thematic short video and its dissemination effects, a key finding is that the content is largely shaped by rural cultural governance and broader policy narratives. Analysis of the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)* in Chapter 4 highlights that 'Core Socialist Values' and 'China's Excellent Traditional Culture' constitute the central focus of cultural governance in rural digital development. In this context, Li and Wu (2022) emphasise the enduring importance of respecting and supporting the elderly in traditional Chinese culture:

> Although China has ushered in a new era of development, the tradition to support and to respect the elders should never be discarded as they are essential characteristics of traditional Chinese culture […] in terms of spiritual support, new technologies that emerge in the digital era could provide more convenience and support for the elderly, providing respect as a form of psychological care under the behavioural model of intergenerational reciprocity. (p. 80)

A transformation that aligns with this policy goal is the notion of 'reciprocity'. In contemporary rural society, a more reciprocal form of filial piety has emerged due to increased mobility among rural youth and the transformation of traditional family structures. As discussed in Chapter 1, prior to digitalisation, rural families experienced significant changes in household composition and the division of labour. Many young people migrated to urban areas for work, weakening traditional family cohesion. This suggests that urbanisation may have changed traditional filial piety practices, with parents increasingly viewing financial and emotional support from their distant children as a manifestation of filial duty (Zhang, Silverstein, and Xu, 2024). Consequently, family ties in contemporary rural China are maintained through emotional obligations rather than hierarchical authority.

Reciprocal filial piety is also evident in the natural closeness and affectionate relationships between parents and children, where children return their parents' care and sacrifices out of respect and love (Yeh and Bedford, 2004). This dynamic is directly illustrated in Video 23. I argue that such representations of filial piety in rural short videos are strongly influenced by policy. The shift from traditional authoritarian relationships to more equal and reciprocal dynamics mirrors the 'Core Socialist Values' emphasis on 'freedom' and 'equality' at the societal level and 'dedication' at the individual level. As 'Core Socialist Values' extend traditional Chinese cultural norms (Song, 2021), the concept of 'reciprocal filial piety' aligns closely with contemporary political and social objectives, presenting traditional filial values in a modernised form.

#Responsibilities and Cohesion

Under the theme of *Rural Family Drama*, several videos (N=49) depict stories centred on *responsibility and cohesion* among peer family members. These videos focus on relationships and interactions between rural youth within families, emphasising the division of responsibilities and mutual support. Most videos (N=45) adopt a touching and lyrical tone, while a few (N=4) are more lighthearted. Notably, the majority of plots (N=45) revolve around the distribution and allocation of pensions, aiming to portray a harmonious and united rural family life.

Technically, like what was observed in the *reciprocal filial piety* sub-theme, Douyin's platform creative play a role in enhancing narrative clarity in these videos. For example, increasing the font size of the text indicates key actions and clarifies characters' responsibilities, while adding close-up shots captures interpersonal interactions; inserting soothing background music and a slow pace conveys an atmosphere of harmony and unity and creates a positive emotional environment for the audience; the interactive comment section allows viewers to discuss topics of fairness and cooperation, effectively extending the narrative into a participatory space.

The moral narratives in these videos help RYPs counter stigma and prejudice from mainstream Chinese cultural groups. By emphasising traditional virtues such as filial piety and family responsibilities, RYPs showcase harmonious rural family life, thereby dispelling negative stereotypes often associated with rural content (Hou, 2022, p. 66). This approach allows RYPs to present a reconciled urban–rural identity and a shared vision of a 'good life' (Cao and Cao, 2021, p. 20). The depiction of rural family life, featuring scenes of family

reunions and collaborative problem-solving, creates a distinctive appeal for rural short videos. As Cao and Cao suggest, this 'family atmosphere with rural characteristics' evokes traditional Chinese family life, childhood memories, and nostalgia among urban audiences (p. 21). Such differentiation enhances the cultural value and appeal of rural short videos, bridging the experiential gap between urban and rural viewers.

On the other hand, this type of short video provides an important representation: within the content of family stories, the pressure on rural youth to provide for the elderly in their original families has been reduced. Since Chinese family relationships significantly impact the quality of life of rural elderly people (Guo, Aranda, and Silverstein, 2009), and family care has historically been the cornerstone of rural elderly care security (He et al., 2021), rural youth have traditionally assumed responsibility for supporting the elderly, including economic support, daily care, and emotional comfort (Tao and Shen, 2014). As highlighted in the previous sub-theme, traditional filial piety—the core spiritual concept of rural families—has shifted towards a more modern form of reciprocal filial piety, fostering spiritually equal and mutually supportive intergenerational relationships. The economic pressure on rural youth in providing for the elderly has been alleviated by the widespread implementation of the 'New Rural Pension Scheme' (NRPS)[21] as stated by Liu (2024):

> If a county is covered by NRPS, all people aged 16 or above with rural Hukou who are not in school and not covered by other pension plans can voluntarily participate in the NRPS [...] Pension income is composed of 2 components: a basic pension benefit and a monthly benefit from the individual account. The basic pension benefit is totally sponsored by the central and local governments (p. 3).

The 'New Rural Pension Scheme' plays a dominant role in stories about rural families, indirectly reflecting the economic division of labour within households to alleviate financial

[21] The New Rural Pension Scheme (NRPS) (新型农村社会养老保险) was introduced by the Chinese government in 2009 as a social security programme aimed at providing pension coverage for rural residents. The NRPS was designed to address the lack of formal retirement support in rural areas, where elderly individuals traditionally relied on family-based care. The scheme combines individual contributions, government subsidies, and collective funding, making it an important step toward reducing poverty among the aging rural population and promoting social equity (Chen and Eggleston, 2021).

pressures or poverty (He, Xu, and Xian, 2017). Peers provide financial support and assistance with collective registration and allocation, while the elderly also contribute collectively to younger family members, creating a mutual-assistance flow of family capital. For example, video No. 34 depicts the division of family responsibilities through the lens of pension distribution, with text overlays showing pension amounts, close-ups on handing-over actions, and background music cues guiding viewer attention**.** The vertical, full-screen format ensures immersive viewing, while speed adjustments and multi-clip sequencing highlight collaborative contributions and fairness in allocation, demonstrating how Douyin affordances concretely convey intergenerational solidarity.

Title: Fair or Unfair

Description Note: After the mother receives her pension, she plans to give it to her second daughter-in-law. Although the second daughter-in-law initially hesitates, she eventually accepts it. Upon returning home, however, she feels it is unfair to her elder brother's family. She decides to visit her elder brother's house to offer him half of the money. The elder brother and his wife explain that they are financially well-off and that it is the second daughter's family who is providing care for their mother. After discussing their mother's living conditions and care arrangements, the second daughter-in-law decides to keep the money.

Figure 11: Screenshots and notes of video (no.34), exemplary Responsibilities and Cohesion by @韩村一家人 (2022).

It is clear from the description and screenshots of video No. 34 that this episode focuses on the division of family care responsibilities, particularly the distribution of pensions. Although the distribution may appear unequal in terms of the number of members and the

amount allocated, the video emphasises the contemporary reality in which family members contribute in different ways. This situation reflects the review in Chapter 1, which noted that some rural youths remain in the village for extended periods to care for the elderly and perform traditional agricultural work, while others migrate between cities and rural areas. He et al. (2017) found that, under current pension policies, both elderly parents and their children perceive improvements in sibling relationships. Once parents receive pensions, most adult children feel that the burden of care responsibilities is reduced. This is illustrated in the video, where elderly parents hand over pensions to their children for distribution, and the children approach the task thoughtfully.

It can be argued that the improvement in living conditions enables one family to share the pension equitably with another family member who is in poorer circumstances but has been providing care for the parents. This mutual understanding reflects solidarity and cooperation among children in contemporary Chinese rural families, gradually alleviating the economic pressures of elderly care. In this model, families work collectively to promote wellbeing (Schwarzer and Querino, 2002), which has become a survival strategy for modern rural households.

Furthermore, sociological research on pensions and family relations, such as He et al. (2017), suggests that pension distribution may generate tensions, particularly in larger families adhering to traditional values. Overly conservative family norms and authoritarian attitudes can cause pensions to become a source of dispute, leading to new family conflicts. However, such tensions are notably absent from the videos analysed. Instead, these videos depict positive narratives in which children demonstrate generosity in pension distribution and mutual support in daily life. Often concluding harmoniously, they align with themes of filial piety and present an idealised representation of rural family life. This positive portrayal constitutes a key aspect of rural short video culture.

Theme 2: Rural Sitcom

Theme Description: The videos (N=86) primarily focus on expressing relationships between rural neighbours, often performed collaboratively by actors from different rural families. Stage settings are typically located in rural public spaces such as fields, village squares, and communal gathering areas. Common narratives include discussions about neighbourhood trust, collective participation in traditional festivals, and other collaborative community activities. Following the focus on family-based content in the previous section,

the analysis of neighbourhood relations highlights how RYPs seek to represent broader rural community interactions**,** extending beyond the family unit to the collective dynamics of rural living.

Building on Graves and Graves' (1974) framework for cooperative, kin-based rural communities, this theme demonstrates that contemporary rural youth continue to inhabit extended social networks. As Peng (2018, p. 32) noted, 'in rural settings where the individualistic effect is negligible or even absent, people still hold onto traditional values and put the family, village, farm and/or community ahead of the individual'. These videos capture the continuity of traditional communal values, illustrating how rural residents maintain trust, solidarity, and collective identity through everyday interactions.

Tonally, these videos frequently employ humour, consistent with Douyin's platform culture, where comedic and entertaining content garners higher engagement and algorithmic promotion (Kale, 2020). This combination of rural subject matter with a sitcom-inspired format facilitates the exploration of community dynamics in an accessible, engaging, and culturally resonant manner.

#Expressions of Trust

A prominent subtheme under this category is the depiction of trust among rural community members, reflected in 49 videos. RYPs creatively highlight evolving social relationships in rural China, shaped by economic development and government initiatives such as the 'Digital Rural Development Strategy', which have mitigated historical isolation and distrust among residents (Laurence, 2011). These videos function as platforms for both entertainment and the assertion of rural identity, reinforcing collective belonging through shared experiences and cultural proximity (Putnam, 2007; Li, Pickles, and Savage, 2005).

For instance, video No. 187 by @小程拍故事 (2021) presents a humorous reconciliation storyline between Mr Cheng and Mr Jin, two rural youths who initially distrust each other due to past misunderstandings. Their evolving bond, grounded in shared rural characteristics, highlights community closeness and collective identity (McPherson, Smith-Lovin, and Cook, 2001), while juxtaposing rural and urban cultural tensions through the presence of an urban female boss. Humour is a deliberate device in this video, achieved through self-deprecating dialogue, visual gags, and pacing that builds comedic tension before resolution.

Douyin creative features are employed to enhance humour, highlight social norms, and encourage audience engagement with these communal narratives. Text overlays highlight punchlines and ironic contrasts, sticker reactions accentuate jokes, and soundtracks punctuate humorous beats, enhancing comedic timing. Split-screen and jump cuts emphasise contrasts between characters, such as rural solidarity versus urban misunderstanding. Interactive features, including likes and comments, may allow audiences to reinforce rural values and discuss urban–rural tensions, extending the social impact of the videos beyond mere entertainment.

Title: People should trust each other, Jin Xiangyu

Description Note: A female boss approaches Mr Cheng, a friend from the village, expressing her interest in dating a man named Jin Xiangyu, also from the village. Mr Cheng jokingly tells her that Jin Xiangyu is a typical rural man with no car, no house, limited financial resources, and a laid-back attitude. Despite this, the female boss remains interested. Mr Cheng reluctantly visits Jin Xiangyu's house to convey her interest. Jin Xiangyu is initially sceptical, believing that Mr Cheng has edited the woman's photograph, and humorously downplays himself, making remarks such as, 'No one would love me' and 'I'm so rustic'. The incident concludes with Mr Cheng displaying exaggerated regret.

Figure 12: Screenshots and notes of video (no.187), exemplary Expression of Trust by @小程拍故事 (2021).

Other videos reinforce similar dynamics, including @猪头荣's depiction of rural solidarity when assisting a fallen farmer, and @李兴达's portrayal of hospitality towards beggars. In

each case, humour mitigates potential conflict, facilitating relatable narratives that appeal to both rural and urban audiences. Douyin's commenting and sharing functions create an interactive layer, where audience feedback amplifies the social and moral messages embedded in these comedic depictions, fostering dialogue and reinforcing trust-based communal norms.

Other videos reinforce these dynamics. @猪头荣's video portrays an urbanite's hesitance to assist a fallen farmer, contrasting urban and rural perspectives while highlighting rural solidarity. @李兴达's video documents rural hospitality towards beggars, further demonstrating trust and mutual support. Across this subtheme, humour functions as a deliberate stylistic device, navigating sensitive intergroup dynamics and promoting understanding. Douyin's platform features—such as text effects, fast- or slow-motion edits, and sound library tracks—allow producers to craft comedic timing with precision and introduce emotional rhythms that resonate differently with audiences, whether through visual gags or the pacing of dialogue (Schellewald, 2021; Papacharissi, 2015).

Through these tools, RYPs may bridge rural and urban audiences, fostering understanding of rural lifestyles. Douyin's algorithmic recommendation system amplifies the reach of these videos, ensuring that depictions of community trust circulate widely. This increased exposure helps reduce social identity gaps (Pettigrew, 1998), enhancing mainstream perceptions of rural life. Thus, RYPs' thematic exploration of trust entertains while educating, fostering nuanced appreciation for rural cultural expressions and community relationships.

#Rural Festival

In addition to trust-based narratives, a second subtheme emerges around collaborative festival-based storytelling (N=37). These videos feature multiple neighbourhood members creatively interpreting traditional festivals, often incorporating humour and novel narrative approaches. According to Xiao et al. (2019), 'as the owners of the countryside, villagers are one of the main stakeholders of rural festivals' (p. 630). Festivals serve to alleviate daily pressures and strengthen community cohesion (Dai and Gai, 2011). In this context, RYPs leverage festivals as opportunities to assemble participants and showcase their creative potential, establishing an important medium for platform-based content production.

Festival videos often present exaggerated or reimagined versions of traditional customs. For example, a comedic short video (Figure 13) depicts New Year greetings in a rural village, where youths wear modern attire (sunglasses, black trench coats) while elderly participants humourously employ firecrackers. The juxtaposition of unconventional costumes, panicked movements, and traditional rituals creates humour. The strategic use of platform tools not only reinforces the comedic and innovative elements of these videos but also facilitates interactive audience participation. Text overlays provide context and highlight jokes, sound effects and music synchronize with physical actions to enhance comedic impact, and filters emphasize exaggeration or a festive atmosphere.

Title: This is a master

Description Note: A group of young men, dressed in black, walk into a farmer's yard in a deliberate and stately manner. Upon seeing them approach, the uncle and aunt in the yard decide to surprise the visitors. The uncle ignites firecrackers and shouts 'Fire!' Startled, the young men fall to the ground, bow, kowtow, and quickly leave the yard after paying their respects.

Figure 2: Screenshots of video (no.138) exemplary Participatory Documentary by @桑植杨永周 (2022).

These videos demonstrate the strategic adoption of platform affordances to produce inventive reinterpretations of rural festivals, aligning with literature on the 'unlikely creative class' (Lin and de Kloet, 2019) and platform dependency/contingent commodity logic (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Audience interaction further enriches content: viewers comment

on creativity (‘More creative than professional directors’ @久演; ‘The No.1 New Year greeting on the whole network’ @厚德载物), and creators respond, fostering participatory content loops. Douyin’s commenting, liking, and sharing functions facilitate this feedback mechanism, creating iterative engagement that informs subsequent video production.

Through these affordances, RYPs ensure that rural festivals are represented as both culturally resonant and digitally innovative. The platform enables humour, collaboration, and audience participation to coexist, producing content that entertains, educates, and reinforces rural community cohesion. By integrating platform-specific features into their storytelling, creators simultaneously uphold tradition and adapt it for contemporary, digitally mediated audiences.

Theme 3: Rural Video Blog

Theme description: The *Rural Video Blog* theme comprises 45 videos centred on self-presentation, typically set in public spaces within rural areas and featuring short performances by a single rural actor. These videos provide glimpses into personal rural life, narrated directly to the camera in a conversational or storytelling style. Content ranges from reflective summaries of a typical day in the countryside to personal vlogs highlighting rural traditions and creative commentary on public concerns such as agricultural challenges, community events, or local governance. The narrations (N=38) are often conversational, resembling a dialogue with viewers, and feature Mandarin Chinese interspersed with local dialects. A smaller subset (N=7) contains no narration, instead conveying the relationship between actors and rural scenes through expressions and actions.

#Factual reality talking

The subtheme *factual reality talking* revolves around the use of creative expression by rural youth on the Douyin platform to present an unfiltered and realistic reflection of everyday rural life. I found that this type of short video helps to amplify underrepresented rural voices in public discourses on social realities, cultural identity, and related topics. Specifically, rural youth capture the intersection of personal and community narratives through the platform’s editing functions, including splicing, speed adjustments, and background audio**,** making the lived experiences of rural communities—which were previously marginalised or ignored in mainstream society—visible to the platform’s end users.

Topic: Rural Jingle

Description Notes: A young woman smiles confidently at the camera while reciting a jingle. The content of the jingle reflects various aspects of rural life, including: 'It is difficult to invite others to dinner', 'Everyone who has just married hopes for twins', 'Every unmarried man desires a wife', and 'Parents farm all their lives, and their children will inherit the land in the future'.

Figure 3: Screenshots and notes of video (no.89) exemplary Factural Reality Talking by @农村萍妹 (2023).

Some videos express rural identity indirectly through language. For example, a video (no. 89) from @农村萍妹 under this theme invites the audience to imagine a young woman's rural identity and lifestyle. Linguistically, the young woman uses Mandarin without explicitly stating her identity, avoiding typical syntactic self-presentation patterns such as 'I am + noun' (Karpova and Borymska, 2022, p. 124). Instead, the audience infers her connection to rural life through the content of her speech, such as 'Every unmarried man desires a wife' and 'Parents farm all their lives, and their children will inherit the land in the future', emphasising marriage, love, and intergenerational relationships. This narrative encourages audience resonance, cultivating a sense of rural identity and illustrating how the performer constructs a persona linked to important aspects of rural community life.

Technically, in this video, the producer strategically employs a range of platform-specific creative tools to shape the narrative and engage viewers. Caption overlays highlight key moments, drawing attention to lines that are humorous or emotionally charged, while text stickers emphasise culturally resonant words or phrases. Subtitles aid comprehension of regional dialects, and background music is synchronised with the rhythm of a jingle,

reinforcing comedic timing and emotional impact. Subtle adjustments to video speed and precise shot editing maintain narrative momentum. These choices allow complex social ideas—ranging from humour and moral values to commentary on rural life—to be conveyed in a concise, emotionally resonant format. Beyond formal features, the platform's interactive ecosystem plays a crucial role: comments, likes, and shares provide immediate feedback, enabling rural youth creators to gauge audience reception in real time. This interactivity validates their creative labour and situates personal and community narratives within broader social discourse, highlighting collective challenges such as intergenerational responsibilities and marriage norms. Through this integration of visual, auditory, and interactive elements, the video exemplifies how platform affordances support both expressive depth and participatory cultural engagement.

Rather than romanticising or reducing rural experiences to a single narrative, the performer adopts an approachable tone, making rural society accessible to a wider audience by combining humour with relevant themes. This demonstrates how creative expression can bridge diverse perspectives and reflects the ways in which rural youth reinterpret their cultural identities, emphasising personal and community life through short video production on Douyin (Duxbury, 2021). Such creative production also illustrates how digital platforms enable rural youth to participate in public discourse in previously inaccessible ways. As Besley (2010) notes, short video applications amplify underrepresented voices by providing low-threshold channels for participation. The young rural woman in the video uses the platform not only for entertainment but also to reflect on the joys and struggles of rural life, transforming personal anecdotes into collective reflections. This underscores the importance of digital media as a tool for inclusion and cultural participation, allowing rural youth to shape public perceptions of their communities.

Moreover, the expression of rural public discourse in these videos highlights tensions between traditional rural values and contemporary mainstream social norms. Humorous references to 'Every unmarried man desires a wife' draw attention to marriage and love in rural areas, while 'Parents farm all their lives, and their children will inherit the land in the future' emphasises intergenerational relationships, often with an element of self-mockery. Like videos on 'reciprocal filial piety', this playful engagement with mainstream narratives reflects a shift in rural youth values consistent with 'Core Socialist Values'. Another video (No. 238 by @农村小哈) illustrates this shift, featuring a blunt voiceover: 'Many families in our village are equal and help each other, and marriage no longer requires gifts'. As Karpova and Borymska (2022) argue, an individual's identity is often revealed through

linguistic behaviour. These lines describe social issues rooted in rural reality, showing that rural youth navigate dual identities (Ojwang, 2015), balancing traditional roots with aspirations for modernisation. Following the wave of rural-to-urban migration (see Chapter 1), rural youth, due to their mobile lifestyles, are both inheritors of tradition and key actors in China's social modernisation. Rural performers articulate this duality in a relaxed yet thought-provoking manner, making these videos public commentaries on rural youth perspectives on communities and identities.

Moving from multi-member interactive performances to individual performances, rural actors connect their personal identity to the countryside in short, solo videos. While community trust reflects rural group identity, individual performances articulate personal identity. Goffman's theory of self-presentation distinguishes personal, social, and ego (perceived) identities, representing conscious and unconscious expressions in society (Goffman, 1959). In this theme, RYPs' online identity aligns with Kim, Zheng, and Gupta's (2011) definition: 'a configuration of the defining characteristics of a person in the online space' (p. 1762). Specifically, rural youth employ camera framing, direct address to the lens, timing of gestures, and audio cues to create personal narratives, convey identities, and shape an imagined reality connecting individuals to rural life.

#Non-verbal reality record

The subtheme of *non-verbal reality record* in Douyin short videos represents a subtle yet powerful form of storytelling, where visual elements and implicit cues take precedence over spoken words. Unlike more direct verbal narratives that address rural social issues, these videos rely on non-verbal communication to reveal the authentic and multifaceted realities of rural life. Through imagery and scene-based interactions, they invite viewers into a narrative that is both evocative and open to interpretation, stimulating emotional connections and personal reflection.

For instance, in @苹果儿's video, a young woman under a pomelo tree conveys a simple yet profound story. Without speaking, the video moves from the pomelo in her hand to the surrounding trees, concluding with her confident smile, accompanied by the text: 'If you feel tired, go to the countryside for a walk, smell the fragrance of the soil, breathe a breath of fresh air, and the trees are full of pomelo'. Similarly, in @农村放羊妹's video (Figure 15), a young woman walks home after herding sheep, with no verbal exchange, while a caption reads: 'Feeling happy and ready to go home'. These examples demonstrate how text overlays

provide interpretive context, camera techniques (such as panning, close-ups, and slow-motion) emphasize details, and ambient sounds or inserted music enhance immersion. Together, these affordances allow creators to convey emotional resonance and a sense of rural pride without explicit narration. Additionally, stickers or visual effects can highlight specific objects or gestures, directing audience attention to subtle elements of rural life.

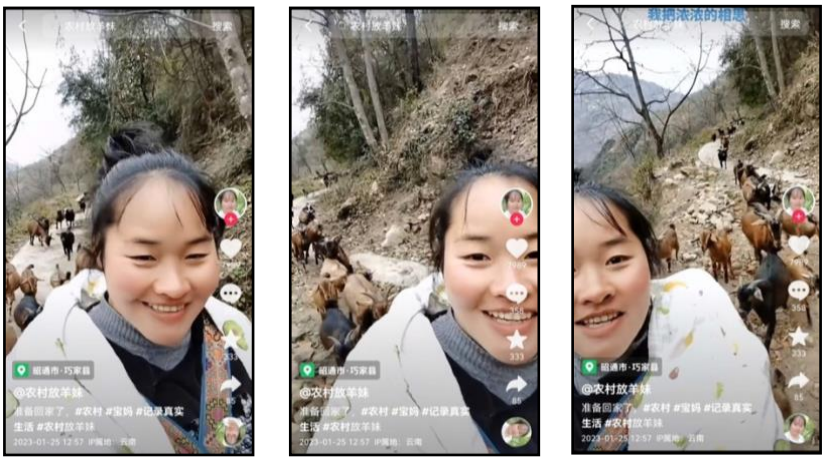

Figure 15: Screenshots of video (no.34) exemplary Non-verbal Reality by @农村放羊妹(2023).

This reliance on non-verbal communication differentiates these videos from traditional self-presentation formats. As noted by Karpova and Borymska (2022), conventional identity expressions often follow explicit syntactic patterns, such as 'I + am + noun.' However, these videos create a 'silent identity configuration' through the integration of personal imagery, rural scenes, and interactive dynamics between individuals and their surroundings. The absence of direct verbal identity markers allows the videos to transcend rigid definitions, encouraging viewers to imagine and interpret identities in the context of rural life. Such non-verbal storytelling aligns with the broader understanding of identity as 'the social positioning of self and others' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2005). In rural contexts, identity is often embedded in community dynamics, shared experiences, and symbols of cultural pride. Goffman's self-presentation theory underscores that identity encompasses not only social but also personal and felt dimensions (Goffman, 1959). These videos embody this perspective by blending personal pride with communal associations, highlighting a strong connection to the land and the evolving rural lifestyle.

The portrayal of rural life in these videos reflects positive and aspirational narratives. The actors' confident performances and the serene rural scenes suggest an embrace of rural identity and satisfaction with economic and social developments in the countryside. As Breakwell (1986) suggests, identity evolves from past experiences and adapts to changing

circumstances, and these videos illustrate how rural youth redefine their identities in the digital age. The frequent appearance of agricultural and pastoral scenes—such as planting (N=4) and animal husbandry (N=3)—in conjunction with positive expressions reinforces the impression of thriving rural communities.

Moreover, these videos resonate with the goals of Douyin's *New Farmer Plan* and the broader 'Rural Digital Development Strategy', which emphasise the integration of modern digital tools in promoting agricultural success and sustainable rural living. As highlighted in recent studies (Hu et al., 2024), visual language in digital media has the capacity to construct powerful narratives that reshape perceptions of rural life. By leveraging Douyin functions such as caption overlays, ambient music, slow-motion, and panning shots, these videos foster imaginative engagement and highlight the transformative potential of rural communities in the digital age. They serve not only as a medium for self-presentation but also as a testament to the dynamic interplay between tradition and modernisation in rural China.

Theme 4: Rural Short Documentary

Theme description: The theme of rural short documentaries captures the essence of rural environments and daily life through observational and participatory formats, aligning with broader research on the significance of these documentary styles. These videos (N=49) focus on showcasing the natural beauty, simplicity, and cultural identity of rural settings without relying on clear actors or explicit narratives. Two subthemes emerge: *Observational Documentary* (N=26), which presents quiet, scenic montages, and *Participatory Documentary* (N=23), which integrates environmental storytelling with human interactions.

#Observational documentary

Observational documentaries excel in capturing the visual essence of rural life by emphasising the natural beauty and simplicity of the environment. This format often employs techniques such as long, uninterrupted shots or rhythmic montages that evoke a sense of calm and nostalgia. These stylistic choices aim to immerse the audience in the depicted rural settings, creating a connection that transcends mere screen representation.

MacDougall (2020) demonstrates that observational filmmaking uniquely prioritises spontaneity and unmediated representation, focusing on human behaviour and the environment as it naturally unfolds. This approach is particularly effective in rural contexts,

where the quiet rhythm of life and scenic landscapes become central characters. For instance, videos (Figure 16), such as @忆乡音, present a single continuous shot of a serene rural house, farmland, and stream, conveying the tranquillity of rural life and inviting viewers to experience its simplicity. Similarly, @淡淡红花香 showcases picturesque montages of mountains, houses, and farmers, echoing MacDougall's assertion that observational filmmaking allows for deep visual immersion, presenting the countryside as a place of poetic beauty.

Figure 4: Screenshots of video (no.289) exemplary Observational Documentary by @忆乡音 (2022).

In these videos, producers employ Douyin's technical affordances to aestheticise everyday rural environments. Techniques such as slow motion, time-lapse, and speed modulation are used to articulate temporal rhythms and seasonal transitions, while subtle filters enhance natural lighting and colour saturation to evoke pastoral sensibilities. The integration of background music—typically instrumental or folk-inspired—constructs an affective soundscape that complements visual imagery,

The aestheticisation of rural life in these documentaries reflects what Castellò (2023) describes as the 'agentic rural'. While rural settings are often stereotyped as static or backward, observational documentaries redefine these spaces as idyllic and aspirational. The focus on visual storytelling reinforces the dual narratives of rural life: its unchanging natural beauty and its potential for transformation. For instance, Castellò explores Spanish documentaries that highlight not only the scenic appeal of rural landscapes but also the resilience and agency of rural inhabitants, a narrative parallel to the techniques employed in

many Douyin videos. Lei, Lee, and Emang (2023) further support this perspective by examining how rural revitalisation documentaries in China use observational techniques to portray rural society's transitions. These films often juxtapose traditional rural aesthetics with signs of modernity, such as improved infrastructure or sustainable farming practices, without disrupting the overall tranquillity and simplicity that characterise rural environments.

This balance between tradition and progress resonates deeply with audiences, particularly in a digital age where rural nostalgia often contrasts with urban fast-paced life. The role of visual language in these documentaries aligns with Schellewald's (2021) concept of 'aestheticised impressions'. By using tranquil imagery, slow pans, and carefully composed frames, creators craft visual narratives that evoke emotional responses from viewers. Douyin affordances such as rhythmic cuts aligned with music, soft transitions, and ambient sound editing enhance the immersive experience, allowing audiences to feel present in rural environments. The deliberate exclusion of personal narratives or actors keeps attention focused on the environment and its intrinsic qualities. These techniques, as seen in the works of Douyin creators like @忆乡音, serve to universalise rural aesthetics, making them relatable and aspirational to a wide audience.

Observational documentaries also contribute to cultural preservation by showcasing everyday rural life, rituals, and traditions. According to Lili (2023), rural documentary photography and filmmaking play a crucial role in recording cultural heritage and collective memory. By visually preserving the unadorned beauty and practices of rural communities, these documentaries ensure that cultural identity is passed on to future generations, reinforcing the timelessness of rural environments. Indeed, observational documentaries provide a powerful medium for portraying rural life through immersive and aestheticised visual storytelling. By emphasising spontaneity, tranquillity, and the poetic beauty of rural settings, these documentaries foster a sense of connection and admiration for the countryside.

#Participatory documentary

Participatory documentary offers a dynamic narrative approach that blends rural environmental narratives with rural people's interactions, emphasising the interconnectedness of individuals with their surroundings. Unlike observational documentaries, which focus on capturing the environment as it unfolds naturally, participatory documentaries require the active involvement of RYPs or subjects to create narratives reflecting shared experiences and collective identities. This approach prioritises

the inclusion of human elements to narrate stories of rural life, providing audiences with a holistic understanding of the social and cultural fabric of rural communities.

Sudbury (2015) highlights the potential of participatory filmmaking in empowering rural communities, particularly in India, where rural women were trained as video reporters to document their lives. This method not only fosters cultural preservation but also allows for authentic portrayals of daily experiences. On Douyin, creators leverage multi-clip stitching to sequence diverse shots, subtitle overlays to clarify narrative intentions, and soundtracks to evoke emotion and continuity. They can also use caption stickers and emojis to highlight warmth, or cultural values, thereby enhancing the interpretive depth of participatory narratives.

For example, a video from @桑植杨永州 (see Figure 17) splices several shots of a village in the Qiaoziwan area, most of which feature rural houses, interspersed with scenes of rural youths walking along the road. One shot depicts a young man eating sugar cane. The video is subtitled, 'This is a real country life'. In this montage, the editing rhythm follows a background music soundtrack associated with homesickness. The video employs seemingly random shots to depict a realistic and objective rural environment. Within this ostensibly objective portrayal, audiences can discern the creator's aesthetic appreciation for the calm and leisurely qualities of rural life. The combination of music, caption timing, and splicing effects enhances emotional resonance while guiding audience interpretation.

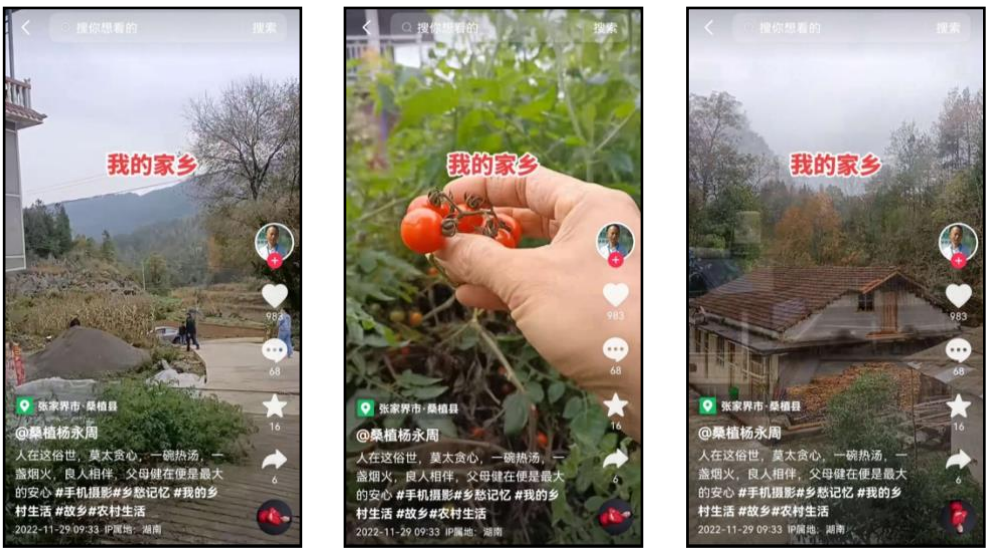

Figure 17: Screenshots of video (no.138) exemplary Participatory Documentary by @桑植杨永周 (2022).

The participatory process also facilitates the creation of what Sudbury (2016) describes as the 'third voice', blending insider and outsider perspectives to produce nuanced narratives. This coalescence ensures that the resulting stories are both authentic and inclusive, capturing the complexity of rural experiences while reflecting the interpretive lens of the filmmaker. Participatory filmmaking aligns with broader trends in media, as Gruber (2016) notes, whereby communities are empowered to shape their media image and preserve cultural narratives. In rural settings across Namibia, Botswana, and Angola, participatory ethnographic filmmaking has demonstrated its effectiveness in fostering collaboration and enabling local voices to be heard. These methods resonate with the growing popularity of rural short videos on Douyin, where RYPs construct symbolic and emotional narratives that highlight their connection to both environment and culture.

Another dimension of participatory documentaries is their capacity to evoke nostalgia and emotional engagement, fostering deeper connections between audiences and the depicted rural settings. Through techniques such as rhythmic montages, poetic subtitles, ambient sound, and background music, these documentaries create an emotional bridge that resonates with viewers. For instance, videos highlighting traditional village activities, intergenerational interactions, or local crafts evoke cultural pride and belonging. Douyin platform functions, such as trending hashtags and pinned comments**,** extend audience involvement and encourage participatory interpretation, creating a dynamic feedback loop between content and viewers. This nostalgic storytelling is particularly effective in showcasing rural transitions, as Lei, Lee, and Emang (2023) note in their analysis of Chinese rural revitalisation documentaries. By integrating human interactions with narratives of change, these films offer a comprehensive view of rural life that balances traditional aesthetics with modern aspirations.

The participatory nature of such narratives ensures that rural communities are not merely passive subjects but active participants in shaping their stories, reinforcing the perception of rural spaces as dynamic and evolving. By intertwining human narratives with environmental storytelling, participatory documentaries empower rural communities to shape their narratives and preserve their cultural identities. This format not only bridges the gap between tradition and modernity but also enhances audience engagement through emotional and symbolic elements. The participatory approach ensures that rural life is represented authentically, creating a shared narrative that highlights the evolving realities of these communities. Through these documentaries, rural voices are amplified, fostering cultural preservation and social connection while celebrating the resilience and vibrancy of rural life.

In summary, the four thematic categories examined—*Rural Family Drama*, *Rural Sitcom*, *Rural Video Blog*, and *Rural Short Documentary*—collectively demonstrate that rural short videos on Douyin are not merely cultural artefacts but expressions of mediated social creativity. Across these genres, Douyin's platform architecture such as editing tools, algorithmic visibility mechanisms, and participatory interaction systems, conditions how rural youth produce, circulate, and interpret creative work. What emerges is a model of creativity that is relational rather than individualised, grounded in the interplay between local experience, digital infrastructure, and collective audience participation. Across these thematic forms, a consistent logic of platform-contingent creativity (Nieborg and Poell, 2018) can be observed. The design and affordances of Douyin—short duration, algorithmic recommendation, and high interactivity (Cao and Cao, 2021)—encourage a style of expression that is concise, affectively charged, and oriented towards instant recognition. Yet within these constraints, rural youth exhibit remarkable adaptability and inventiveness, reworking local cultural repertoires into new digital vernaculars. Rather than being passive recipients of technological affordances, they actively interpret and repurpose them, turning editing tools, filters, and captions into instruments of cultural expression and community representation.

Moreover, the participatory ecology of Douyin transforms creative authorship into a collective endeavour. Comments, duets, and shared challenges extend the meaning of each video beyond its initial upload, creating an evolving dialogue between creators and audiences. This continuous cycle of production, feedback, and reinterpretation thus exemplifying what Bederson and Goldberg (2016) term 'social creativity', a participatory process in which culture and identity are collaboratively produced and continuously remade. This emphasises a distributed cultural process through which rural identity is collaboratively performed, validated, and reimagined in the digital sphere. The interplay between individual artistry and algorithmic mediation thus redefines what it means to be creative in contemporary rural China.

In conclusion, the analysis of rural short videos demonstrates that Douyin operates not merely as a distribution channel but as a socio-technical environment that structures and amplifies the creative agency of rural youth. Through its affordances, algorithmic logics, and participatory culture, the platform enables the convergence of traditional communal values with modern digital aesthetics. The creative practices observed here including spanning storytelling, humour, documentation, and self-performance illustrate how digital media reshape cultural participation, fostering a form of collective authorship that bridges

rural and urban publics. Ultimately, Douyin's ecosystem transforms everyday acts of expression into a living archive of social imagination, where rural creativity is both preserved and continually reinvented.

Discussions Beyond the Themes: Rural Discourse in the 'Digital Public Rural Sphere'

This section explores the thematic and discursive practices of rural short video content through the lens of the 'digital public rural sphere', a concept that captures how rural short video production on Douyin constitutes a mediated space for negotiating social and cultural discourse. These 'short video discourses' emerge from RYPs' creative engagement with rural life, shaped by both local social norms and the structural and algorithmic affordances of the platform. While Habermas's classical notion of the public sphere may not directly translate to the Chinese context, it offers a useful heuristic for understanding how rural actors engage with issues of visibility, representation, and normative cultural values in a digitally mediated environment. In particular, this perspective highlights how rural short videos operate in a hybrid space where social expectations, state guidance, and platform governance intersect, producing a distinctive form of digital deliberation that reflects local practices, creative expression, and broader policy frameworks.

As of the end of data analysis in 2024, the #rurallife tag had been viewed 961.95 billion times, making it the most viewed rural short video tag. Judging by its communicative outcomes on the Douyin platform, it can be inferred that the primary rural theme constructed by RYPs centres on rural life. Under this hashtag, through the thematic analysis in the previous section, I identified four main popular themes: *Rural Family Drama*, *Rural Sitcom*, *Rural Video Blog*, and *Rural Short Documentary* (see Figure 18). It should be noted that these proportions do not reflect the overall frequency of rural short videos on the Douyin platform. Rather, they represent the content distribution of the 300 short videos observed and recorded under the 'Rural Life' tag using a user-centric browsing mode. These proportions indicate the most commonly encountered content types when engaging with the tag through standard, user-friendly browsing.

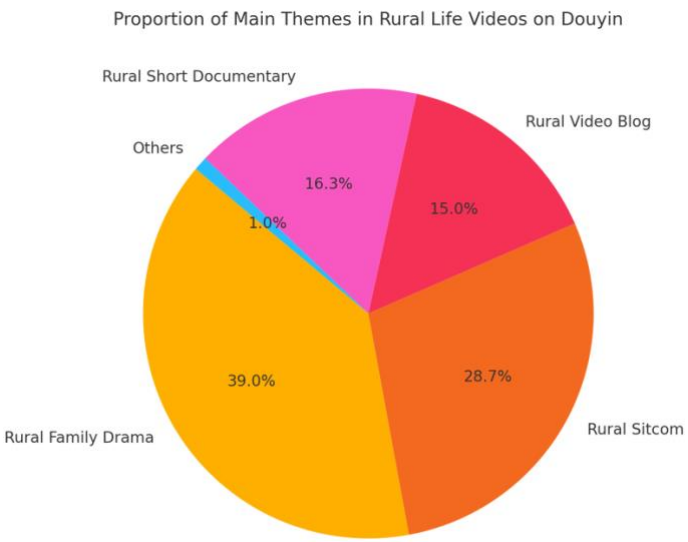

Figure 5: Proportion of main themes after browsing 300 #rurallife videos on Douyin (source: author).

Building upon the thematic and content analysis presented in the previous section, my metadata analysis and descriptive coding—examining dimensions such as ‘space’, ‘props’, ‘language’, and ‘moral elements’—revealed important commonalities. These findings highlight how RYPs strategically shape rural discourse in the ‘digital public rural sphere’ on Douyin. Using Habermas’s concept of the ‘public sphere’ as a theoretical framework, I extend this notion to rural producers who leverage Douyin to express concerns, construct identities, and engage with societal issues.

The analysis reveals two distinct characteristics that define rural discourse in the ‘digital public rural sphere’. First, at a macro level, rural short videos portray an image of deindustrialisation in rural life. Second, at a micro level, these videos employ negotiation rhetoric through the use of rural Mandarin, moral themes, and humour. Together, these characteristics not only illustrate how rural public opinion is formed and shared but also demonstrate how RYPs selectively construct and popularise rural content to achieve visibility and resonance on the platform.

Ultimately, rural discourse in the ‘digital public rural sphere’ can be understood as a product of dialogue among RYPs, the Douyin platform, national policies, and commercial imperatives. Through this ongoing negotiation, RYPs construct a digital landscape in which rural narratives gain visibility and actively shape public discourse, bridging local experiences with broader socio-political contexts.

Traditional agricultural production and family interiors: Constructing a discourse of deindustrialisation on rural life

Deindustrialisation is a phenomenon typically understood as being driven by increased productivity in manufacturing, which reduces the demand for labour, alongside a growing preference for services over goods as affluence rises (Rowthorn and Ramaswamy, 1997). Although traditionally associated with economic and industrial transformation, I borrow the term 'deindustrialisation' to describe how these videos construct and present a narrative of rural life that minimises elements of industrialisation. The content emphasises traditional agricultural lifestyles, natural landscapes, and cultural heritage, effectively downplaying or omitting visual and symbolic signs of industrial development in rural areas arising from urbanisation and informatisation. By showcasing idyllic rural spaces, such as fields, courtyards, and forests, these videos create a constructed narrative of rural life that aligns with the aesthetic and ideological connotations of deindustrialisation. On Douyin, this borrowed term underscores how rural short videos respond to and critique historical modernisation efforts while resonating with contemporary narratives of cultural preservation and ecological sustainability. In this way, these videos contribute to a vision of deindustrialised rural life that is both aspirational and closely connected to collective imaginaries of rural identity.

Nodes	Codes
Main Space	Indoor: Kitchen (45), living room (38), firewood room (5), cave (4), bedroom (21), shop (8) Outdoor: Courtyard (26), village street (22), field (79), village public square (4), pure natural environment (27), roof (3), pasture (13), mountain road (5) Others (3)

Table 6: Codes under *Main Space* (source: author).

Based on the coding analysis, most video settings prominently feature natural and traditional rural spaces, such as courtyards, fields, and forest houses, rather than modernised or industrialised environments. The coding results revealed specific patterns in the representation of these spaces: indoor locations such as kitchens (45), living rooms (38), and bedrooms (21) were frequently depicted, while outdoor spaces like fields (79), courtyards (26), and pure natural environments (27) dominated the videos. In contrast, modernised spaces such as cultural squares, service centres, or industrial facilities were conspicuously

absent. This deliberate focus on traditional and non-industrialised rural settings creates a visual narrative that romanticises traditional farming life and rural simplicity.

For example, in video no. 289 by @忆乡音 (2022), under the theme of observational documentary, serene visuals of rivers, trees, and houses evoke a pre-urbanisation rural landscape. This portrayal contrasts sharply with the fast-paced urban environment (Auclair and Vanoni, 2004), presenting rural life as an idyllic escape from urban pressures. This aligns with the concept of 'urban disease' (Li, 2020), wherein urban dwellers long for the simplicity and comfort of rural life. Interviews with RYPs indicated that this romanticisation is often intentional. One participant explained:

> Many rural youth now go out to work, usually in cities. We want to create a beautiful rural landscape. When these rural youth are tired of living in the city, they can return to the countryside. The countryside is not that bad. When they return to the countryside, they can earn some income through Douyin, and the Party Central Committee also hopes that they will come back (SI-RYP-3, 15 May 2023).

Another participant emphasised the need to preserve the distinct characteristics of rural areas, stating:

> I think rural areas should have rural characteristics. Nowadays, many urban companies have occupied rural land, and many rural areas have changed. The real countryside needs fewer industrial things and more natural scenery (SI-RYP-5, 28 June 2023).

The technological affordances of the Douyin platform also play a significant role in amplifying these portrayals. Modern tools, including aerial photography, filters, and montage editing, create a non-linear viewing experience that intensifies the romanticisation of rural landscapes. Emotional background music (BGM) accompanying themes such as rural family drama and rural sitcom evokes nostalgia, while high-tech filming techniques further heighten the aesthetic appeal of rural life. As noted by Cao and Cao (2021), the platform constructs a 'middle landscape', blending rural nostalgia with digital spectacle. This curated imagery reflects the interplay of media literacy, knowledge exchange, and power dynamics among RYPs. These technological interventions help RYPs align their

content with audience expectations; the idyllic rural landscapes cater both to a nostalgic urban audience and to the personal aspirations of rural youth.

Unlike traditional media industries, which often conceal production processes, rural short videos on Douyin offer a relatively open glimpse into cultural production.

Nodes	Codes
Props	rural heated bed (38), red envelope (58), banknote (25), bank card (24), farm tool (76), rural vehicle (42), cotton clothes (246), firecrackers (35), rural big pot (79), agricultural products (83), basket (71), broom (29), firewood (18), cigarette (45), Chinese Bajiu (54)

Table 7: Codes under *Props* (source: author).

Coding analysis revealed the frequent use of props such as farm tools (76), rural heated beds (38), cotton clothes (246), and agricultural products (83). These elements are deeply rooted in rural life and invite audiences into the 'backstage' of rural living (see Table 7). Ortner (2009) mentioned the concern about the access issue in the cultural production process of Hollywood. In contrast, rural short videos on new media platforms are relatively accessible, attracting ordinary audiences, academic researchers, and individuals from diverse backgrounds. Consequently, the boundaries between insiders and outsiders of traditional cultural production are gradually diminishing. The materiality and spatial elements of rural cultural production on Douyin are no longer 'high-level', and a complete understanding of the life experience of insiders is increasingly attainable (Ortner, 2009, p. 177).

This accessibility reflects a shift in rural youths' approach to media exposure; rather than avoiding mass media, they actively invite audiences to engage with their private lives (Fang, 2021). Through themes such as rural family drama, rural sitcom, and rural video blogs, RYPs share experiences that extend beyond the videos themselves. For example, family meals depicted in courtyards, with rustic props such as wooden benches and agricultural tools (video no. 35, @黑猪跑跑), not only represent daily rural life but also encourage audiences to reflect on the simplicity of slower-paced living. These scenes create a distant, non-reciprocal interaction with audiences (Cao and Cao, 2021), fostering cultural intimacy and inviting viewers to participate in an imagined rural identity. This process constructs a narrative of rural life that is simultaneously accessible and aspirational, blending real and imagined elements to appeal to both rural and urban audiences.

Another key finding is that the tension between the aspirational imagery of rural life on Douyin and the material realities shaped by earlier modernisation efforts underscores a critical inconsistency. This inconsistency is deeply rooted in the socio-economic transitions of rural areas. From the analysed short videos, these portrayals often emphasise idyllic, unindustrialised settings, highlighting traditional agrarian lifestyles and pristine natural environments. In contrast, previous rural modernisation policies prioritised industrialisation, urban expansion, and infrastructure development, which significantly altered rural landscapes. For instance, policies discussed in Chapter 1 focused on land consolidation and rural–urban integration, resulting in the widespread replacement of farmland with urban settlements, thereby fragmenting and homogenising rural spaces (Peng et al., 2024). These policies prioritised urban-centric growth, often disrupting rural ecosystems and undermining traditional community structures (Long et al., 2009). Top-down strategies heavily emphasised economic growth (Xiao et al., 2018), frequently at the expense of cultural preservation and ecological sustainability.

However, this divergence is being addressed through new rural policies implemented after 2018, which integrate ecological conservation and cultural sustainability as foundational principles. In addition to highlighting rural groups' agency in shaping rural public culture, the 'Digital Rural Development Strategy' (Chapter 4) and the *Rural Revitalisation Strategy* explicitly promote sustainable development and the protection of rural culture:

> Avoid arbitrarily merging villages to build large communities and demolishing and rebuilding against the wishes of farmers. Strengthen the overall control of rural landscape, pay attention to the individual design of farmhouses, build an upgraded version of rural areas based on rural society, rich in regional characteristics, carrying rural nostalgia, and reflecting modern civilisation, avoid thousands of villages with the same appearance, and prevent the urbanisation of rural landscapes (GOV, 2018).

Consequently, the depiction of deindustrialised rural landscapes in Douyin short videos represents a strategic alignment with the state's vision of rural revitalisation post-2018. By emphasising natural landscapes and traditional agricultural practices, these visual narratives resonate with government efforts to reposition rural areas as vital components of national development. They also support complementary policy objectives, such as encouraging urban-to-rural migration, fostering rural entrepreneurship, and promoting rural tourism as a mechanism for economic revitalisation (Liang et al., 2020).

It should be noted, however, that RYPs' representations of 'deindustrialised' rural landscapes do not imply that rural areas are undergoing—or are required by policy to undergo—actual deindustrialisation. According to Wei and Wang (2019), excessive deindustrialisation would adversely affect China's agricultural labour transfer and, by extension, the rural modernisation process. As discussed in Chapter 1, the rapid industrialisation following the Reform and Opening Up policy led to large-scale migration of agricultural labour from rural areas to cities. Between 1978 and 2017, the proportion of agricultural labour in total Chinese employment declined from 70.5% to 27.0% (Wei and Wang, 2019, p. 16), while the current average proportion of agricultural employment in developed countries is approximately 3% (Lagakos and Waugh, 2013), which shows that China still has a considerable number of agricultural labourers who need to transfer employment in the future, therefore industry is still an important industrial sector to absorb the employment of migrant formerly agricultural labour force.

Therefore, the *Rural Revitalisation Strategy* and the cultural representations in short videos converge in presenting deindustrialisation at the level of cultural and everyday life—through housing, tourism, and rural aesthetics—without depicting actual industrial transformations. This reflects the current trajectory of China's rural modernisation and the transformation of the urban–rural dual economic structure. Nevertheless, the analysis of rural short videos in this study demonstrates that RYPs already possess a cultural vision that shapes contemporary perceptions of rural life in the digital era, effectively merging cultural nostalgia with policy-driven objectives.

Rural Mandarin, morality, and humour: promoting a negotiated rhetoric

The rhetorical elements of public discourse play a crucial role in forming and disseminating public opinion by framing issues, persuading audiences, and shaping collective narratives. As Hauser (1998) emphasises, public discourse is a dynamic process in which vernacular dialogue interacts with rhetorical strategies to influence perceptions and create shared understandings within public spheres. Rural short videos on Douyin illustrate how RYPs strategically employ rhetorical tools—such as language, morality, and humour—to construct compelling narratives of rural life and engage diverse audiences across social and cultural boundaries. These strategies not only enhance the accessibility and relatability of rural experiences but also mediate storytelling, articulate rural identities, and facilitate the

inclusion of rural voices in the digital public sphere, thereby challenging urban-dominated cultural narratives. Moreover, these approaches shape public perceptions of rural issues on Douyin and underscore the significance of rural content across both linguistic and extra-linguistic dimensions (Cherikbaeva and Musaeva, 2024).

Rural Mandarin

The first notable finding is the linguistic adaptation observed in these videos, particularly the shift from rural dialects to Mandarin. As a Mandarin-speaking urbanite, I was surprised that most of the language and information in rural short videos were easy to understand, and all had Mandarin subtitles.

Nodes	Codes
Language	Standard Mandarin (53), Non-standard Mandarin (235), Rural Dialect (12)

Table 8: Codes under *Language* (source: author).

Coding analysis revealed that, while some videos featured rural dialects (12), most employed either non-standard Mandarin (235) or standard Mandarin (53), with subtitles in Mandarin to ensure accessibility. For example, in short video No. 34, shown previously under the subtheme of responsibilities and cohesion, the Mandarin phrase '你吃了吗' ('have you eaten') is pronounced nǐ chī le ma in standard Mandarin, but in the video it is ní chǐ le ma, reflecting regional dialect features. Although this observation is based on my urban identity and Mandarin proficiency, it indicates some linguistic variation in rural speech.

This aligns with Chambers, Trudgill, and Schilling-Estes's (2002) concept of 'language variation', which refers to changes in language form caused by social, situational, and contextual factors. For RYPs, this adaptation reflects their dual role as cultural producers addressing urban audiences and as rural insiders navigating a digital public. The shift from rural dialects to Mandarin makes rural authenticity more legible to urban viewers, enhancing engagement while subtly retaining regional linguistic features to preserve rural identity. As Kreuzbauer and Keller (2017) note, authenticity in cultural production depends on conveying intended meaning while aligning with both producer intentionality and audience expectations. Hughes (1995) describes this as a balance between aesthetic authenticity and cultural representation. In this context, RYPs construct a form of 'staged authenticity' (Chhabra, Healy, & Sills, 2003), where deliberate linguistic adaptation is performative yet genuine, enabling rural narratives to resonate across social and cultural boundaries.

However, it may be one-sided to view the adaptability of rural dialects solely as a strategy for rural youth to participate in public dialogue in a rapidly developing digital environment or to enhance the relevance and influence of rural cultural products (Jørgensen, 2008). I argue that this unique rural Mandarin also reflects the lasting impact of rural-urban population flows resulting from the 'urbanisation' of rural China after the Reform and Opening Up, which shaped the language habits of rural youth introduced in Chapter 1. Zhang (2010) provides socio-economic context for this linguistic feature, noting:

> For most rural people, different languages or dialects represent different identities and social statuses. The fact that urban people can speak Mandarin fluently shows that they have superior status, high social status and high education level. For rural people, whether they can speak the same language as urban residents signifies their acceptance into this new group (p. 66).

This highlights the enduring identity dilemmas faced by rural youth as a result of rural urbanisation since the Reform and Opening Up. In this context, the adaptive language changes seen in rural short videos should be understood not only as a response to digital exposure but also as a reflection of broader socio-linguistic shifts shaped by historical rural-urban migration. Regardless of whether it stems from a deliberate strategy to reach wider audiences or the continuation of prior language habits, this style represents a subjective expression of rural youth actively engaging in consultative dialogue across urban and rural social structures.

Morality

Nodes	Codes
Moral elements	filial piety (68), Trust (49), hard work (67), responsibility (49), none (67)
Highlighted character relationship	brothers and sisters (42), husband and wife (7), parents and children (23), parents-in-law and children-in-law (33), grandparents and grandchildren (12), neighbourhoods (86), individuals (45), none (42)

Table 9: Codes under Moral elements and Highlighted character relationship (source: author).

The moral discourse in rural short videos on Douyin reflects a carefully curated narrative that integrates coding data and interview responses, highlighting key values such as filial

piety (68), trust (49), and hard work (67). These values frequently serve to resolve conflicts within the narratives; 86% (197/228) of videos featuring moral themes culminate in positive outcomes, such as family reconciliation or strengthened neighbourly trust. Participants emphasised the importance of these themes in promoting a positive portrayal of rural life. One participant explained:

> We want to convey some positive spirit to the audience. For example, when I was doing a story about filial piety between parents and children, although there were some disputes in the middle, in the end the children understood the importance of being filial to their parents, which generally reflected the good side of our village. I think this arrangement is also what the audience prefers (SI-RYP-3, 15 May 2023).

The coding results further reveal that moral discourse often centres on familial relationships and community ties. Themes of *reciprocal filial piety* frequently involve interactions between parents and children (23) or in-laws and children (33), while trust and hard work appear in contexts of community cooperation and neighbourly relations (86). These patterns resonate with RYPs' emphasis on portraying rural life as harmonious and morally grounded.

However, the prominence of moral discourse cannot be attributed solely to the personal motivations of RYPs. Moral concepts and practices are complex and are continuously shaped and (re)constructed by social and political forces (Qin, 2023). Their prevalence in rural short videos may also reflect their regulatory potential on Douyin, where social issues such as rural pension challenges, rural youth migration, and community cultural development are indirectly addressed. Policy analysis in Chapter 5 demonstrates how moral values in short videos align with government objectives. The 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' and associated policies emphasise the dissemination of information, the strengthening of rural public services, and support for left-behind elderly populations. Moral rhetoric in videos—such as filial piety, division of responsibilities, and trust—closely mirrors these policy priorities. Emphasising filial piety, for example, resonates with long-standing Confucian ideals and the government's efforts to cultivate a harmonious rural society (Zhao, 2011). Similarly, rural digital development strategies discussed in Chapter 4 encourage cultural preservation and the reinforcement of moral narratives (Chen, 2016) as part of rural revitalisation efforts.

Interviews revealed how RYPs internalise and reproduce these values. As one participant noted, 'Filial piety is actually an essential quality in our rural life… the division of family responsibilities is something most rural families face' (UI-RYP-13, 13 November 2023). This statement reflects the integration of traditional values into digital storytelling, serving both as cultural expressions of RYPs and as responses to policy-driven narratives aimed at maintaining social stability and cultural continuity (Lei, 2009) in rural areas.

However, this process involves negotiation between the idealised values promoted in videos and the complexities of real rural life. RYPs often simplify narratives to align with audience preferences and platform algorithms. One participant explained:

> In fact, there is no such good way to solve conflicts between families or neighbours. Filial piety is indeed often mentioned within families, but there are often not so many selfless people among neighbours. Although people in rural areas are simpler than those in cities, they are not as noble in spirit. Conflicts between neighbours often end up breaking up. But if we make such a realistic video, no one may watch it, and if it is spread, it will give people a bad impression of the countryside. (SI-RYP-10, 2 September 2023)

This strategic curation reflects the dual pressures faced by RYPs: the need to engage audiences with uplifting moral stories while implicitly reinforcing state-endorsed values. The negotiation between authenticity and idealism highlights the complexities of cultural production within the platformised governance of Douyin.

Consequently, the construction of moral narratives facilitates the universality of rural content on Douyin. By emphasising themes like trust and filial piety, which resonate across urban and rural divides, these videos create a shared moral framework that appeals to diverse audiences. This universality aligns with China's socio-political priorities, integrating rural and urban values under the broader framework of socialist cultural ideology (Luo and Wang, 2024). Furthermore, compelling narratives that focus on moral dilemmas and resolutions amplify the cultural significance of rural life, allowing it to be reimagined and integrated into the deliberative space of rural discourse.

Humour

Humour is a key rhetorical element in rural short videos on Douyin, serving multiple purposes, including engaging audiences effectively (Barry and Graça, 2018) and addressing complex rural issues in an accessible manner. As Kayam, Galily, and Sover (2014) suggest, humour can break down cognitive barriers, making audiences more receptive to messages that might otherwise be ignored or resisted:

> One who addresses others using humour is perceived by them as someone positive and friendly, one who is worth being around. At the same time the humour causes them to unconsciously open cognitive barriers, and makes them receptive to messages that if heard in a different manner, without humour, they might not have been open to or in agreement with. (p. 7)

Nodes	Codes
Augmented reality effect	Filter (23), audio pop meme (63), frame special effect (14), portrait special effect (5), video pop meme (3), sticker (4), none (186)
Emotion	Touching (115), humourous (78), nostalgic (53), peaceful (47), none (7)

Table 10: Codes under *Augmented reality effect* and *Emotion* (source: author).

Coding data reveal that a humorous tone appears in 78 videos, distributed across themes such as rural sitcom (76/86, 88%), rural video blog (21/45, 47%), and family lifestyle (25/117, 21%), suggesting its strategic use to highlight interpersonal relationships, community dynamics, and shared experiences within rural contexts. The relatively high prevalence of humour in community-focused videos underscores its effectiveness in illustrating the connections and tensions of rural life for both rural and urban audiences. Techniques such as audio pop memes (63), filters (23), and other augmented reality effects (e.g., stickers and visual enhancements) serve to amplify comedic elements and enhance viewer engagement. Humour in these videos is expressed through self-deprecation, visual incongruity, and insider jokes, each reflecting broader social, cultural, and rhetorical functions.

Firstly, self-deprecating humour enables RYPs to highlight their economic struggles and social disadvantages in a relatable and light-hearted manner. For example, numerous videos depict scenarios in which low-income rural families humorously contrast their lives with

those of wealthier urban or rural counterparts. Exaggerated depictions—such as rural parents employing improvised tools or comparing their modest homes to grand urban apartments—evoke laughter while subtly addressing systemic inequality. This humour not only entertains but also functions as a coping mechanism, as Hobbes (1651) theorised that humour often arises from adversity, permitting individuals to reclaim agency over their challenges. Self-deprecating humour acts as a mirror through which rural creators can both laugh at their struggles and critically reflect upon them. Mohammed and Majeed (2023) further emphasise that this form of humour fosters relatability, reducing emotional barriers between creators and diverse audiences. It establishes a connection that resonates with both rural and urban viewers by offering a window into rural life without alienating them or creating a sense of 'otherness'. This dual function of humour—both as a narrative device and as a means of fostering solidarity—renders it particularly effective in promoting inclusivity and broadening public discourse.

Secondly, visual incongruity constitutes another strategic use of humour frequently employed by RYPs, wherein contrasting elements are combined to generate comedic tension and provoke reflection. For instance, in case video no. 56, presented under the theme of the rural festival entitled 'Rural Art Festival Video', the solemn task of promoting 'traditional virtues of the Chinese nation' is humorously juxtaposed with exaggerated, carnival-like performances, complete with flamboyant costumes and over-the-top choreography. The interplay of formal messages with absurd visuals produces a comedic dissonance, demonstrating the capacity of rural youth to engage critically with cultural norms while maintaining a celebratory tone. During the Spring Festival, performers often appear in exaggerated costumes, blending modern popular culture with traditional rural attire to create a vivid interplay between past and present. These juxtapositions illustrate the cultural flexibility of rural youth, who simultaneously critique and celebrate their heritage. Dynel and Poppi (2020) note that such multimodal humour not only captivates audiences but also encourages critical reflection on societal contradictions, including tensions between modernisation and traditional values. By merging visual absurdity with cultural commentary, these videos function as layered forms of storytelling, fostering deeper engagement with rural realities.

Thirdly, inside jokes grounded in shared rural experiences emphasise humour's role in fostering community cohesion and relatability. These jokes draw upon the collective challenges and cultural norms of rural life, such as the difficulty of finding spouses, limited resources, or the peculiarities of village politics. In video no. 137, for example, humour

emerges from exaggerated depictions of matchmaking events, in which families scramble to present eligible bachelors in comical and overstated ways—a scenario intimately familiar to rural audiences. These shared experiences function as 'social currency' (Neuendorf et al., 2014), reinforcing communal bonds while simultaneously inviting urban viewers to empathise with and engage in these rural realities. Such humour not only consolidates a sense of belonging within rural communities but also serves as an entry point for urban audiences to gain insight into rural life. Dundes (1987) contended that humour cultivates a shared sense of belonging and mutual understanding; in the context of rural short videos, it bridges the gap between local experience and the broader digital public sphere. This humour taps into collective memory and identity, thereby creating an inclusive platform for dialogue.

Humour in rural short videos serves as a powerful medium for cultivating a 'digital public rural sphere' of rural discourse**,** transforming personal and community narratives into accessible public dialogue. Through creative techniques such as self-deprecating humour, visual incongruities, and inside jokes, RYPs foster a sense of authenticity and community. These techniques echo findings from Lim (2013), who observed that digital platforms such as YouTube empower marginalised voices to challenge power structures and address taboo topics. Furthermore, Najda-Janoszka and Sawczuk (2020) note that humour in social media communications enriches participatory interactions, a dynamic reflected in how RYPs invite audiences to engage in inclusive conversations about rural life. By addressing issues such as economic inequality, rural identity, and social cohesion within a comedic framework, RYPs engage audiences while sparking discussions that might otherwise remain marginalised. Zhou and Teng (2023) argue that rural short videos facilitate 'two-way communication' between rural and urban communities, contributing to cultural and economic revitalisation by preserving rural memory. Additionally, humour is particularly effective in engaging emotionally driven audiences (Barry and Graça, 2018) and can amplify public voices while promoting bottom-up communication on sociopolitical issues (Adegoju and Oyebode, 2015). This highlights the dual purpose of humour in rural short videos: audience engagement and the expression of rural public opinion. On the one hand, much of the humour aligns with the state-sanctioned narrative of promoting harmony and traditional values, supporting a vision of rural life rooted in cultural heritage. On the other hand, humour can be subversive, critiquing the romanticised image of rural life.

Conclusion

This chapter presents an in-depth evaluation of rural short videos on Douyin, revealing their expressive forms and the ways RYPs construct the rural discourses under the 'digital public rural sphere'. By analysing 300 videos under the hashtag #Rurallife, the chapter highlights how RYPs creatively adapt traditional media genres—such as drama, sitcom, vlog, and documentary—into digital storytelling formats that reflect and reshape rural cultural narratives. Through thematic analysis, four main themes and their subthemes emerge: *Rural Family Drama*, *Rural Sitcom*, *Rural Video Blog*, and *Rural Short Documentary*. Each theme demonstrates the dynamic interplay between traditional cultural values, modern media affordances, and the socio-political influences shaping rural life. These themes emphasise the dual nature of rural short videos as both cultural products and tools for negotiating rural identity within a governance framework shaped by policy, platform dynamics, and audience expectations.

Specifically, the analysis of *Rural Family Drama* reveals a focus on reciprocal filial piety, responsibility and cohesion, highlighting evolving intergenerational relationships influenced by policies such as the *New Rural Pension Scheme*. These narratives blend traditional Confucian values with modern expectations of reciprocity and equality, aligning with state goals of rural revitalisation. Similarly, *Rural Sitcoms* showcase humorous depictions of neighbourly interactions during festivals and within communities, reflecting cooperative dynamics in rural life. By leveraging comedy and satire, these videos connect urban and rural audiences, dispelling stereotypes and fostering a shared appreciation for rural culture. The exploration of *Rural Video Blogs* demonstrates how RYPs engage in self-presentation and identity expression through verbal and non-verbal storytelling. These videos navigate the tension between traditional rural values and modern social norms, providing an authentic yet aspirational view of rural life. *Rural Short Documentaries* employ observational and participatory styles to preserve cultural heritage and promote narratives of rural transformation. Through tranquil visuals, rhythmic montages, and participatory storytelling, these videos balance nostalgia with aspirations for rural modernisation, capturing the beauty and resilience of rural life.

The second half of this chapter provides a broader discussion of how rural short videos construct the rural discourse under the 'digital public rural sphere'. This digital space reflects a deliberate negotiation between the idyllic portrayal of rural life and the socio-economic

realities shaped by earlier industrialisation and modernisation efforts. Through themes such as deindustrialisation, moral storytelling, and humour, RYPs create an accessible, inclusive discourse that aligns with national policy priorities while offering a platform for cultural preservation, social critique, and public engagement. By amplifying rural voices and bridging urban-rural divides, rural short videos on Douyin serve as both cultural artefacts and instruments for rural revitalisation in the digital era.

In sum, this chapter demonstrates that rural short videos are not only a means of cultural expression but also a vital medium for engaging with the broader socio-political context of contemporary rural China, transforming rural life into a visible, participatory, and impactful component of the deliberative space of rural discourse. Building on the thematic and content analyses of rural short videos, the next chapter shifts focus to the behind-the-scenes experiences of RYPs, exploring how they navigate the platform's digital infrastructure, algorithmic demands, and socio-economic influences. It examines the intermediation process, shedding light on how RYPs leverage Douyin's technological affordances, negotiate platform governance, and transform their creative labour into economic, social, and political capital.

Chapter Six: RYP's Productive Experience in Digital Intermediation Process on Douyin

This chapter addresses the RQ3: *How do rural youth producers participate in the digital intermediation process, and how do interactions in this process influence their continued production?* Drawing on RYPs' experiences of producing short video content on the Douyin platform, it explores how Douyin functions as a digital intermediary that shapes cultural production processes. Specifically, the chapter examines how RYPs navigate the platform's technological affordances, algorithmic demands, and socio-economic influences, transforming their creative labour into economic, social, and political capital. The analysis highlights how digital intermediation not only mediates access and visibility but also defines the opportunities and challenges that shape the production and dissemination of cultural content on Douyin.

By incorporating the framework of 'digital intermediation' outlined by Hutchinson (2023) and drawing on current studies of platformisation (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, 2021), this chapter situates RYPs' experiences within a broader understanding of how digital platforms operate as intermediaries. Douyin's algorithms, operational mechanisms, and governance structures play a central role in determining how RYPs engage with the platform and its audiences, influencing their capacity to convert digital engagement into social recognition, economic benefit, and political visibility. This aligns with Hutchinson's (2017) assertion that digital intermediaries can amplify marginalised cultures and provide pathways for self-development by connecting them with broader audiences and interests.

The research findings reveal that RYPs possess a nuanced understanding of Douyin's technological and algorithmic infrastructure, which they strategically leverage to enhance their visibility and popularity. This digital agency, characterised by their ability to navigate platform dynamics, enables RYPs to negotiate opportunities for self-representation and to capitalise on their cultural practices. However, this process is not without its challenges. The complex power relations embedded within digital intermediation are evident in RYPs' interactions with national policies, mainstream social norms, and the platform's 'invisible

gatekeepers'—its algorithms. These dynamics influence not only the content that RYPs produce but also how they position themselves within the broader socio-political landscape.

This chapter argues that the continuous production and dissemination of cultural content by RYPs on Douyin are inherently shaped by their participation in digital intermediation. Their capacity to adapt to audience interests, platform governance, and algorithmic mechanisms is central to the construction of social, economic, and political capital. At the same time, the chapter critically examines how these processes are conditioned by structural inequalities and power imbalances, including the influence of national policies and platform-centric norms on RYPs' creative and professional trajectories.

Short video production as a process of personal capital accumulation

Digital intermediation can be understood as a practical process available to online content creators. Following Hutchinson's (2023) three core aspects of cultural production within the framework of digital mediation, this study finds that RYPs continue to engage in capital construction across the economic, political, and social fields. This process of capital construction is closely and sustainably linked to their own cultural production. The attempt to combine personal capital accumulation with the platform's affordances reflects, to a certain extent, RYPs' readiness for sustainable, long-term operations on the Douyin platform. In other words, Douyin has become a potential pathway for RYPs to pursue personal development.

However, beyond discussing the construction of RYPs' economic, political, and social capital, what is of greater interest here is the question of what determines the popularity of rural short videos. In other words, to what extent does the popularity of such videos depend on the efforts of RYPs as digital influencers, and to what extent does it rely on the platform's automated mechanisms for traffic promotion? It should be noted that the term 'popularity' here refers to the expectations of short video content as perceived from the creator's perspective. This study found that RYPs' production of rural short videos on Douyin is influenced by algorithms and automated processes, which form a crucial part of the digital intermediation process. From the producers' standpoint, the production process of rural short

videos initially depends on their own creative input, but the content is subsequently filtered and evaluated by Douyin's algorithm.

Therefore, examining this first stage—how the cultural production of rural short videos affects RYPs themselves—can help explain why rural youth are motivated to produce such content, what benefits this practice brings them in terms of personal development, and other significant aspects related to their cultural production experiences.

At this stage of the research, responses to these questions are informed by a discussion of RYPs' experiences in integrating their own capital accumulation into the platform's production processes to enhance their visibility as digital image producers. These insights and findings are primarily derived from interviews with RYPs.

Generating tangible revenue and intangible capital

Hutchinson (2023) highlights that economic capital in online content production is built through two interconnected dimensions: the direct revenue generated by creative outputs and the intangible benefits derived from cultivating an audience and personal brand. These insights align with the findings of this study, which identify two key modes of economic capital accumulation among RYPs on Douyin: earning tangible income through short video commerce and building intangible capital via sustained audience engagement and personal branding. These modes, facilitated by Douyin's digital intermediation processes, reflect the platform's capacity to mediate rural cultural production while integrating economic opportunities.

> If China has a population of 1.4 billion, then the number of rural [individuals] should be 800 million. In this case, if we improve the content of rural short videos, we can attract more viewers, and economic benefits will naturally come (SI-RYP-7, 03 August 2023).

This statement underscores the vast market potential available to rural-themed content when producers strategically align their creations with audience interests, demonstrating the scalability of rural short video production as a sustainable economic model.

The first mode involves direct revenue generation through short video commerce. RYPs utilise Douyin's e-commerce functions to connect audiences seamlessly with their agricultural products, transforming traditional farming into a digitalised *export sales model*. For instance, Participant 8 explained:

> We are surrounded by our own orchards. Because we have a unique environment, we want more people to eat it, and then we also want to sell our products through the internet. I also want to help my family relieve some pressure and improve the way agricultural products are exported. (SI-RYP-8 @牛城可可, 13 August 2023).

These findings illustrate how Douyin empowers RYPs to integrate storytelling and agricultural commerce, enabling them to reach broader audiences and earn higher incomes than traditional rural economic models typically allow. Such video evidence of agricultural production appears extensively in the rural vlog themes analysed in Chapter 5, complementing the economic motivations of RYPs alongside their cultural aspirations. Participant 9 echoed this, noting:

> Generally speaking, people in plain areas can save 20,000 to 30,000 RMB a year by working, but we sell goods through Douyin short videos, and our annual income from selling chestnuts may be twice theirs. No one thinks the economic income of rural people in the mountain area is now much higher than they imagined (SI-RYP-9, 28 August 2023)

These examples demonstrate how the platform functions as a digital intermediary, linking rural producers directly with consumers and expanding market access in unprecedented ways.

The second mode focuses on building intangible capital through personal branding and long-term audience engagement. RYPs recognise that the consistent production of high-quality content fosters trust and loyalty among viewers, which in turn sustains economic opportunities. Participant 8 further reflected on this, stating:

> If I persist, I will gain more and more fans, my personal production ability will also improve, and my financial income will develop. Having a higher income

> will also help me produce better rural stories' (SI-RYP-8 @牛城可可, 13 August 2023).

This illustrates the reciprocal relationship between content improvement and economic growth, as the pursuit of authenticity and audience-centred creative labour ensures the continued relevance of their work on the platform. Participant 4 similarly emphasised Douyin's role in facilitating visibility and accessibility for rural producers, stating:

> I think the promotion (on Douyin) is much faster. This APP is a little more magical than others. For example, if you want to think about or search for something, it is better than Baidu. That is to say, you can find everything by just doing one search. If you encounter any difficulties or doubts, you can find them here, so more people follow it more than other platforms. There are many users on the platform, and it is easier for our rural short videos to be disseminated (SI-RYP-4 @晓毅班长, 23 June 2023).

Although participants did not mention specific marketing strategies, their preference for Douyin appears to be linked to its capacity for visibility empowerment. In conjunction with Sun's (2024) research on how short videos reshape rural income models, this suggests that bridging the information gap represents a key advantage of Douyin in enhancing consumer trust in agricultural products. As discussed in Chapter 5, RYPs actively negotiate authenticity and public expression in their short video content. Whether through the selective representation of rural life or the emergence of rural Mandarin, their communication strategies seek to connect with audiences and enhance the universality of their content. From the perspective of economic capital accumulation, this aligns with the tendency to produce audience-centred creative labour (Fung, He, and Cao, 2022) in exchange for economic capital.

The economic opportunities brought by the above platform-based short video production may cause the transformation in the lifestyles and opportunities of rural youth in China, This shift is characterised by a move away from traditional agricultural labour and urban migration towards leveraging digital platforms such as Douyin to build sustainable livelihoods within their communities. As outlined in Chapter 1, rural youth historically faced limited economic prospects and were often compelled to leave their hometowns in search of

higher-paying urban employment. Douyin has disrupted this pattern by enabling RYPs to remain in their communities while participating in a digitally mediated economy.

Through digital intermediation, RYPs have enhanced their digital agency, employing tools such as algorithmic promotion, e-commerce integration, and livestreaming to merge traditional agricultural practices with contemporary technologies. This shift allows rural youth to redefine their roles as entrepreneurial agents who represent rural identities as dynamic and innovative. As noted by Sun and Meng (2023), platforms like Douyin foster localised entrepreneurial opportunities and reshape aspirations, demonstrating how digital technologies can bridge the gap between tradition and modernisation. Moreover, these practices also reflect the implementation of the Chinese government's 'Internet + Agriculture initiative', through which rural producers are directly connected with consumers via the Douyin platform (Liu, 2024), aligning with national policy goals of agricultural modernisation and rural revitalisation.

The economic capital accumulated through digital intermediation has profoundly enhanced the economic independence and collective potential of rural individuals and communities. By generating income through short video commerce, RYPs exceed the earning capacity of traditional farming methods while simultaneously building consumer trust through authentic storytelling. This model reduces dependence on intermediaries, empowers rural youth to manage their own economic trajectories, and provides a replicable framework for others within their communities. These transformations have catalysed greater digital engagement across rural areas and may foster a ripple effect of broader economic participation.

Nevertheless, challenges such as limited internet infrastructure, reliance on opaque algorithms, and market saturation continue to pose significant barriers (Tumiwa et al., 2022). In response to these challenges, Chapter 4 of this study highlights the role of rural development policies and Douyin's *New Farmer Plan* in expanding training programmes and promoting inclusivity. Thus, RYPs' dual participation model of economic capital accumulation within the process of digital intermediation demonstrates how the personal vitality of rural youth has been reshaped by platformed production experiences, positioning rural communities as active participants in China's economic modernisation—particularly within the digital economy.

Building offline recognition and digital innovation

Another key finding of this study reveals that RYPs on Douyin are actively building dual forms of social capital—online visibility and offline recognition—that redefine their relationships within both their local communities and the broader digital landscape. Although Douyin's comment and group functions were not directly observed during the video-browsing stage of the research, the records from 'Section C on public comments and opinions' in the interviews (see Appendix A) provided valuable evidence of interactive spaces. Unexpectedly, participants rarely mentioned the impact of online interaction on their production processes. Instead, they emphasised how their digital presence translated into offline social recognition and community participation.

For instance, Participant 4 shared,

> Locally speaking, because I am a Douyin producer, although I am not an important person in our area, most of the neighbours have heard of me… so if they have any events or whatever they are doing, they will invite me to participate. They will also make suggestions for my creations. It can be said that I am somewhat famous in our village (SI-RYP-4 @晓毅班长, 23 June 2023).

This localised fame illustrates how digital platforms such as Douyin facilitate the accumulation of social capital that extends beyond the virtual sphere into everyday relationships, reinforcing the role of RYPs as cultural intermediaries within their communities.

Existing studies, such as those by Sun and Meng (2023), suggest that platforms like Douyin foster entrepreneurial opportunities for rural youth by enhancing online visibility. Similarly, Ji (2021) highlights how rural creators employ short-video platforms to merge urban and rural cultural narratives, making rural lifestyles more visible to urban audiences. While these studies underscore the significance of online visibility, the present research offers a differentiated perspective by revealing the profound role of offline social capital in sustaining and enriching RYPs' digital practices.

Participant 7 highlighted this unique aspect, noting:

> Douyin bloggers in big cities cannot copy many things in mountainous rural areas like ours. Although technically speaking, we may not be able to compete with them in what we do, but due to the geographical environment, they cannot copy the things we photograph. Our daily interactions with neighbours in the rural village help us create local stories. This is a development pathway that suits us as rural creators (SI-RYP-7, 03 August 2023).

This finding challenges the prevailing emphasis on online interaction in existing scholarship and highlights the need to examine the offline dimensions of digital content creation—particularly within rural contexts.

Psychological and social benefits underscore the profound significance of offline visibility for RYPs, as illustrated by Participant 5's reflection:

> At present, it means that I have been recognised by my hometown. I think this is pretty cool. It means that no matter where you go, people will know that it is you. You are a good person and you are doing a good job on Douyin. I feel like I have done something valuable. It seems that everyone gets to know you, understands you, and recognises you through some videos. This can be said to be wealth on a spiritual level (SI-RYP-5, 28 June 2023).

Offline recognition not only enhances RYPs' sense of self-worth but also fosters belonging and purpose within their communities. This aligns with Guo and Tan's (2023) findings, which highlight how digital platforms amplify the agency and subjectivity of rural individuals by providing spaces through which they can reclaim visibility and assert their narratives, particularly in contexts where they have historically been marginalised. However, the production experiences described by RYPs extend these insights by demonstrating the dual impact of online and offline visibility. While digital platforms broaden the reach of rural creators, the offline recognition they gain serves as a critical feedback loop—reinforcing their creative motivation and deepening community ties.

For example, Participant 4 described how local feedback directly informs their creative process: 'They [neighbours] will also make suggestions for my creations. It can be said that I am somewhat famous in our village' (SI-RYP-4 @晓毅班长, 23 June 2023). This symbiotic relationship between digital presence and offline community engagement shows

how RYPs draw both psychological fulfilment and creative inspiration from their local environments.

The accumulation of offline social capital may signal a departure from the traditional rural youth lifestyle of previous generations, which was typically characterised by the pursuit of economic opportunities elsewhere. As discussed in Chapter 1, rural youth were historically compelled to leave their communities due to the unequal distribution of rural resources—a process that often disrupted family and cultural bonds. The new narrative emerging through digital intermediation challenges this historical pattern by providing alternative pathways for rural youth to achieve success within their local environments.

Participant 7's observation captures this transformation: 'our daily interactions with neighbours in the rural village help us create local stories. This is a development pathway that suits us, as rural creators' (Si-LYP-7, 3 August, 2023) reflects this change. RYPs emphasise that they do not wish to abandon their cultural roots; instead, they draw upon local interactions to produce content that resonates with both local and wider audiences. Na (2023) highlights the cultural bridge established by rural-themed short videos, which connect rural and urban audiences through authentic storytelling (p. 51). This study extends Na's analysis by showing how offline social capital not only enhances authenticity but also anchors rural youth within their communities, thereby reducing the economic and social pressures that historically drove migration.

The impact of offline social capital extends beyond individual empowerment, aligning with broader rural policy objectives. The 2016 *No. 1 Central Document* was the first to emphasise rural subjectivity, recognising the importance of rural communities in shaping their own development. Subsequent policies, such as the *Chinese Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)* and the *Rural Revitalisation Strategy*, aim to strengthen rural economic and cultural cohesion by retaining local populations and protecting traditional practices.

The offline recognition gained by Rural Youth Producers (RYPs) demonstrates how digital platforms contribute to these policy goals, particularly by fostering cultural continuity and economic participation within rural communities. Participant 4 noted that community feedback enhances their creative work, illustrating how offline social capital facilitates collaboration and strengthens rural cultural sustainability. This finding reflects Roos and Olin-Scheller's (2018) argument that rural culture has historically been underrepresented in

digital spaces, and that RYPs play a crucial role in engaging rural communities through digital participation.

Furthermore, offline social capital forms the foundation for both bonding and bridging social capital. Bonding social capital reinforces intra-community ties, while bridging social capital connects rural communities to broader networks (Tiwari, Lane, and Alam, 2019). This study shows that RYPs function as intermediaries between local communities and digital environments, nurturing both types of social capital. By remaining deeply rooted in their communities while leveraging digital platforms, RYPs bridge the divide between traditional rural practices and contemporary digital innovation. Their dual role not only enhances the cultural significance of rural content creation but also positions them as key contributors to policy objectives centred on cultural preservation and rural modernisation.

Navigating ideological boundaries for political capital

Political capital accumulation among RYPs on Douyin reflects a complex negotiation with national ideology and platform governance, highlighting both the opportunities and constraints inherent in digital intermediation. Hutchinson (2023) emphasises the potential for online creators to influence public discourse, yet RYPs face significant challenges in leveraging this potential due to the dual pressures of state censorship and platform regulations. Participant 4 described these constraints vividly: 'Douyin is very strict now. It has very strict supervision, and the content must be original and positive, or if you publish some social and political remarks, it will censor you'(SI-RYP-4 @晓毅班长, 23 June 2023).

This regulatory environment limits RYPs' ability to openly engage with public discourse, channeling their efforts into carefully curated content that aligns with ideological boundaries. In this way, Douyin functions as a gatekeeper in the accumulation of political capital, mediating the balance between state interests and user participation. Findings presented in Chapter 4 indicate that the platform has effectively become a rural policy filter, particularly through the integration of the *New Farmer Plan* with broader rural policy initiatives. Consequently, short video production and political discourse among RYPs appear inevitably shaped by these policy-platform dynamics.

The negotiation between consent and resistance emerges as a defining feature of RYPs' political capital accumulation. Drawing on Hall's (1981) concept of 'hegemony':

> […] Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. (Hall, 1981, p. 518).

This study finds that RYPs operate within an 'arena of consent and resistance', where their cultural production reflects both alignment with and subtle opposition to dominant narratives. Participant 7 highlighted this tension:

> We talk about funny family stories, neighbour stories, but it is relatively rare to talk about real difficulties we face in rural areas […] Leaders do not like it. If you do not maintain a high degree of consistency with the party, the work cannot be disseminated quickly (SI-RYP-7, 03 August 2023).

This observation underscores the constraints placed on RYPs' engagement with public discourse, as their creative decisions must navigate censorship while maintaining cultural relevance. The digital platform plays a pivotal role in this process, functioning both as an enabler and regulator of public discourse. By providing tools for content creation and dissemination, Douyin facilitates the amplification of rural voices; yet, its algorithmic governance and censorship policies reinforce ideological boundaries, limiting the scope of political participation.

A significant finding of this research is RYPs' strategic use of humour and indirect storytelling to address sensitive issues while avoiding direct confrontation with ideological constraints. Participant 8 explained:

> I think that if you want to shoot this kind of real video about the current situation of rural life, it can be expressed in a joking way. It doesn't mean that it has to be in a polite way. It can be made in a funny way for the audience to watch. The audience will think about the meaning behind it. It doesn't have to be very straightforward; it can be roundabout (SI-RYP-8 @牛城可可, 13 August 2023).

Similarly, Participant 7 noted:

> We map the rural situation onto some popular people and memes. For example, you can say humorous things, but they should be popular not vulgar. Then you can also talk about them in a slightly exaggerated way, but you must not participate in or discuss politics or get involved in some political and political affairs. The topic of political censorship is relatively sensitive. Just grasp this level, neither relying on the government to make some grand and empty propaganda, nor getting involved in some vulgar and kitsch-oriented things. (SI-RYP-7, 03 August 2023)

These statements illustrate how RYPs creatively embed critique within culturally resonant humour, allowing them to address sensitive rural issues without overtly challenging ideological boundaries. This aligns with Chen, Kaye, and Zeng's (2021) findings that humour is a powerful rhetorical tool for engaging with politically mediated environments on platforms such as Douyin. By embedding political critique within culturally familiar expressions, RYPs accumulate political capital while remaining compliant with platform regulations.

This finding is consistent with the role of humour in rural discourses within the 'digital public rural sphere'. As discussed in Chapter 5, rural short videos contribute to the formation of these discourses. Interview data indicate that, unlike language or moral appeals, humour is often the most direct and effective tool for RYPs to navigate the political intermediary environment on Douyin.

Exposing rural conditions through jokes and humour is generally acceptable, both to RYPs and to higher-level ideological authorities. This 'joking' approach partly explains the limitations of RYPs' discussion of current rural conditions—particularly poverty—and other public discourse on the Douyin platform. These constraints are influenced by multiple forces, primarily higher-level ideology and, secondarily, Douyin's platform supervision. Importantly, this dynamic should not be read merely as evidence of state control over RYPs ideology; rather, it highlights RYPs' efforts to negotiate with higher-level ideologies to maintain access to public discourse and to establish their own rules for cultural production and dissemination.

In addition, these issues involve not only acts of resistance but also alignment with or acceptance of state narratives. Interviews with participants revealed that the term 'positive energy' was widely invoked when discussing politically related topics. For example, Participant 5 stated:

> At present, my creations are mainly based on the general direction of national policies. My videos are mainly propaganda with positive energy. However, there will also be some people who are dissatisfied with the feelings of this, so they say that the government ask me to say something which is fake, because in their words, they never received the policy support (SI-RYP-5, 28 June 2023).

The emergence of this term warrants discussion. According to Triggs (2019), 'positive energy' was popularised around the 2012 London Olympics and is accurately described as focusing on 'social and moral issues accompanying marketisation and undermining Party dominance, the reinforcing of a common duty to resolve such problems in unison with the state, a promotion of active moral behaviour, and support for state control of the internet' (Triggs, 2019, p. 105). This term, therefore, represents a political narrative promoting patriotism and nationalism; in simpler terms, it reflects the country's ideological education. On the Douyin platform, this ideology manifests across several content themes identified in Chapter 5, including the moral messages in rural family dramas and rural sitcoms, the active participation of rural production and life in rural video blogs, and the depiction of traditional rural landscapes in short documentaries.

This research finds that 'positive energy' videos constitute a concrete manifestation of RYPs' negotiation of consent to national ideology. As Chen, Kaye, and Zeng (2021) observed, in addition to Chinese government accounts, personal micro-level accounts are a significant component of positive short video propaganda, often emphasising concepts such as filial piety and grassroots role models (p. 21). Although the limited scope of this study prevents a full assessment of the extent to which rural short videos intersect with positive energy content, there is reason to argue that RYPs' topic selection, particularly in videos addressing themes like reciprocal filial piety, is strongly influenced by the national positive energy propaganda strategy.

According to interviews with RYPs producing relevant content, this influence may derive either from a desire to obtain promotion and support from Douyin for tagged videos or from

a strategy to avoid ‘unnecessary trouble’ (SI-RYP-2, 28 April 2023). In this sense, consent does not imply passive acceptance but reflects a negotiated process**,** in which RYPs intentionally or unintentionally integrate state narratives into their content. This negotiated consent aligns national ideological discourse with rural short video production and enables RYPs to accumulate political capital in accordance with state expectations, demonstrating how creative agency operates within structural constraints.

In conclusion, the findings of this study reveal how RYPs on Douyin engage in short video production to generate economic, social, and political capital through platform-mediated practices. Douyin functions as a transformative tool, enabling RYPs to integrate traditional rural practices with digital innovation, thereby building sustainable livelihoods and achieving personal development. By leveraging the platform’s digital intermediation features, RYPs not only attain tangible economic benefits through e-commerce but also cultivate intangible capital by fostering audience engagement and personal branding.

These transformations demonstrate that rural youth can remain embedded within their communities while actively participating in the broader digital economy, signalling a departure from traditional models of rural economic dependency. Moreover, the observed significance of localised recognition highlights the critical role of offline social capital, as RYPs’ digital visibility translates into meaningful engagement within their communities. This dual visibility enhances the cultural and social relevance of their work, bridging rural and urban audiences while promoting rural cultural sustainability.

Additionally, participant insights and platform dynamics illustrate how RYPs navigate ideological boundaries to accumulate political capital, strategically employing humour and indirect storytelling to comply with platform regulations and align with national ideological frameworks. This practice reflects their ability to balance consent and resistance, contributing simultaneously to the broader political narrative of rural modernisation and cultural preservation.

‘We Rely on Algorithms’

Discussions of the processes of personal capital accumulation, as a means of understanding RYPs’ participation in digital intermediary practices on the Douyin platform, also point to a

crucial element within this online cultural ecology: the algorithm, or, more broadly, the algorithmic culture of Douyin. In line with Williams's (1958) conceptualisation of culture, it is evident that rural short videos reflect a historical moment in contemporary China, situated on the Douyin platform and shaped by changing rural economic conditions and national cultural policies. This context raises important questions regarding the self-expression of rural youth and the representativeness of social media practices.

However, the cultural stereotype, or the popular style of rural short videos, is continually and sustainably influenced by the power of the platform's algorithm. In this study, it is evident that the development of the Douyin platform, rural economic growth, rural cultural policies, and the broader needs of rural cultural development collectively shape RYPs' engagement with platform technologies. In turn, the interaction between RYPs and Douyin's technological affordances determines how rural short videos circulate within the platform's cultural ecology.

Thus, whereas the previous sections analysed economic, social, and political capital, addressing the first half of RYPs' cultural production processes, this section focuses on the latter half: their relationship with the platform algorithm and the dissemination of short videos.

Algorithms as Black boxes

Through interviews with RYPs regarding the algorithm and recommendation mechanisms on the Douyin platform, it became evident that, while RYPs possess a preliminary understanding of the algorithm and data usage, this understanding remains superficial and incomplete. Specifically, RYPs are aware that Douyin incorporates an 'accurate' traffic push function (SI-RYP-6 @二猪的故事, 21 July 2023), often operationalised through promotional initiatives such as the *New Farmer Plan*. However, they lack a deeper comprehension of the precise mechanisms underlying these algorithms, which limits their ability to navigate or influence the structures governing their digital visibility.

RYPs frequently attempt to cater to the algorithm or align their content with perceived traffic-promotion strategies to gain exposure. Yet, their engagement often stops at this stage, with limited consideration of how algorithms 'screen' content or how rural short videos are

reconstructed or reframed within Douyin's algorithmic ecosystem. According to the 'black box' argument (Pasquale, 2015), algorithms are designed, implemented, and continuously modified by computer engineers and administrative staff, rendering their inner workings opaque to most users. This opacity is particularly pronounced for RYPs, as illustrated by the following reflections:

> I feel that although Douyin's traffic push is very accurate, sometimes my works will receive unexpected traffic. I don't know why. It may be that my works meet certain indicators of the platform algorithm (SI-RYP-6 @二猪的故事, 21 July 2023).

> In traffic promotion activities on the Douyin platform, especially official activities such as the New Farmer Plan, except for some recommendations on content themes, I really can't see what the judging criteria are. I have only a little knowledge, and it is difficult for me to understand the specific details (SI-RYP-8 @牛城可可, 13 August 2023).

These accounts demonstrate that, while RYPs strive to optimise their content for visibility, outcomes are often unpredictable due to the algorithm's opacity. The lack of detailed official guidance further exacerbates this uncertainty, creating a significant barrier for RYPs, who generally lack the technical expertise and resources required to navigate these complexities. This contrasts with the audience experience, where users can simply input interests into a search bar to engage with the recommendation mechanism. For RYPs, however, building connections with audiences and enhancing content visibility necessitates grappling with the opaque processes through which algorithms evaluate and distribute their work. This added complexity often forces RYPs to balance the production of culturally meaningful content with the demands of algorithmic alignment. As Participant 3 explained it:

> For us, the most important thing is traffic. I think everything else is meaningless. Because there are about 800 million daily active users on the Douyin platform, and to gain traffic, whether it is improving your shooting ability on your own or using more novel materials, you should do it (SI-RYP-3, 15 May 2023).

Another participant emphasised the importance of meeting platform standards to achieve exposure:

> If our official requirements are that whether you reach 1 million views, it is about the results of interaction data, or what standards various indicators meet, the official should give us a certain amount of traffic after we complete it, which will be the most helpful (UI-RYP-14, 13 December 2023).

Among the 14 interviewed RYPs, 10 explicitly cited traffic as their primary motivation for producing short videos or participating in platform initiatives. While their understanding of platform terminology and technical processes may be limited, their discourse around 'traffic' highlights a reliance on exposure as the defining metric of success. Participant 6 succinctly articulated this sentiment: 'Whether it obtains traffic or not is the most important thing' (SI-RYP-6, 21 July 2023).

This dependence on traffic aligns with Rogers' (2018) critique of 'vanity metrics,' which cautions against overreliance on superficial indicators such as views and likes:

> Vanity metrics is a critical term from business studies that admonishes analysts for a reliance on the brute counting of page views and likes as indicators of success in the hit and like economies (p. 451).

While such metrics can provide useful insights into user engagement, they often incentivise creators to prioritise numerical benchmarks over broader cultural or narrative objectives. Rogers advocates for a more nuanced approach to social media engagement that considers the deeper relationships between creators, audiences, and content within the platform ecosystem. This perspective is particularly pertinent to algorithmic culture, where automated processes mediate interactions and shape the cultural discourse surrounding digital content.

The over-reliance on traffic as a success metric constrains RYPs' ability to fully engage with the broader communication ecology of rural short videos on Douyin. Algorithms, functioning as invisible intermediaries, exert a profound influence on how these videos are evaluated and disseminated. As Striphas (2015) observes, a 'specific category of symbols that humans cannot understand or intend can still have a profound impact on form' (p. 77). RYPs' dependence on algorithmically mediated outputs underscores the challenges of

navigating a cultural production process shaped by an invisible yet powerful digital intermediary.

Although rural youth often lack complete understanding of platform algorithms and rely heavily on traffic as a metric of success, it would be inaccurate to assume they have no insight into algorithmic function. Interviews reveal that RYPs exhibit a nuanced understanding of algorithms through their conscious efforts to resist being narrowly defined by platform-imposed labels. This reflects a deliberate 'game' with algorithms, demonstrating attempts to balance immediate, traffic-driven priorities with the sustainable development of rural short video culture. Rather than focusing solely on traffic indicators, RYPs actively create content that transcends algorithmic categorisation. Participants articulated this dynamic engagement as follows:

> One feature of Douyin's short videos is tagging. The system will automatically tag our short videos. We don't need to participate in activities in a certain field, but the platform automatically categorises our account according to the primary type of content we post. To subdivide what field it belongs to, so it will automatically distribute the traffic in that field to us. So, in order for more viewers to see it, we try not to be limited to one label (SI-RYP-1, 14 April 2023).

> I want the content of our videos to be diversified, such as multiple themes. If the video can resonate with the audience and create awareness of rural life, convey information, and express the theme, then it will be okay: don't take random photos with your phone just to chase views or catch up with events (SI-RYP-2, 28 April 2023).

These statements highlight RYPs' strategic efforts to maintain thematic diversity and cultural richness, even within the constraints of algorithmic tagging and recommendation systems. They reveal an evolving interplay between creators and the platform, where RYPs actively negotiate automated processes that shape visibility and reach. Moreover, the cultural production practices of RYPs demonstrate how they function within the broader ecosystem of rural short video culture while participating in algorithmic mediation. This role is characterised by deliberate decision-making that imbues their work with symbolic meaning, reinforcing the cultural and emotional resonance of their videos.

For example, Participant 6 described the intentional incorporation of thematic symbolism in their content:

> The video I took is about the son-in-law who comes to the new family. What does the son-in-law who comes to the new family face? That is to say, after the protagonist got out of his last relationship, the two of them ended up breaking up due to personality differences in various aspects. And in fact, the protagonist is a relatively honest person. He is kind of naive, but not stupid. Now there are many people like this in rural areas who understand that what I want to reflect is the issue of spiritual quality, that is, people should still be honest with each other (SI-RYP-6 @二猪的故事, 21 July 2023).

This example demonstrates how Participant 6 deliberately embeds the theme of 'honesty' into their videos, highlighting a spiritual quality that resonates with rural audiences. Similar perspectives were shared by other participants, who emphasised the importance of producing meaningful, high-quality content:

> It is very important that the videos you shoot have good content. If your work becomes popular, it may be because your audience learns something or gains emotional resonance (SI-RYP-8 @牛城可可, 13 August 2023).

> High-quality videos bring accurate traffic ... Without substantial stories or spirit, the platform may not promote your videos (SI-RYP-12, 30 September 2023).

> Traffic and official promotion on Douyin depends on your creative ability... while aligning with the platform's recommendation mechanism (SI-RYP-3, 15 May 2023).

These reflections illustrate that, although algorithms shape traffic and visibility, the success of rural short videos ultimately hinges on the producer's capacity to create authentic, thematically rich, and culturally resonant content. RYPs understand that balancing creativity with algorithmic demands requires not only technical skills but also a commitment to preserving the symbolic and cultural integrity of their work.

In terms of power dynamics, this strategy of producing high-quality content positions the algorithmic culture on Douyin as an extension of broader social production relations. Neither the storytelling of rural life nor the spiritual values embedded in these videos exists in opposition to rural cultural production. Rather, algorithms and automated processes function as both mechanical and symbolic forces within this ecosystem (Crawford, 2021, p. 18). The ongoing interaction between RYPs and these processes represents a continuous 'permanent exchange' (Hutchinson, 2023, p. 37), providing creators with opportunities to shape rural cultural narratives while navigating the constraints imposed by platform algorithms.

This interplay resonates with Gillespie's (2016) framing of cultural production as being 'in anticipation of the value people may find in them and means by which they may circulate' (p. 61). While native forms and symbolic values inevitably pass through the algorithmic 'black box', RYPs acquire valuable insights into how these elements are processed and how audiences respond to algorithm-mediated outputs. This interactive learning process positions algorithms not merely as passive tools, but as active components within cultural production, enabling creators to engage strategically with the forces shaping the circulation and reception of their work.

The Participation of Creative Institutions

The participation of creative institutions in the rural short video ecosystem reveals both opportunities and challenges for RYPs. While fully understanding or significantly influencing Douyin's automated processes, such as algorithms and recommendation systems, remains a considerable challenge, RYPs are aware of the inherent limitations rural creators face within this ecosystem. This awareness has motivated them to adopt minor yet impactful digital strategies to promote cultural diversity and symbolic depth in their content. These strategies underscore RYPs' ongoing pursuit of cultural production approaches that align both with platform algorithms and audience preferences.

A significant finding of this research is the critical role played by creative agencies in supporting rural producers. Based on the interviews, five RYPs utilise creative agency services, demonstrating the substantial presence of these institutions in rural short video production. This connection highlights that the economic capital accumulated by RYPs is often tied to partnerships with creative agencies or Multichannel Networks (MCNs). These

agencies act as intermediaries, ensuring producers achieve higher visibility and exposure by navigating Douyin's algorithmic systems effectively. As Cunningham, Craig and Silver (2016) analyse the rise of Multichannel Networks (MCNs) as key intermediaries in YouTube's evolving screen ecology, demonstrating how they facilitate the monetization and professionalization of digital producers by managing the dynamic exchange between content, platform algorithms, and audience engagement, while my research is also highlighting the similar precarious and rapidly shifting nature of rural short video landscape.

Creative agencies serving rural producers provide comprehensive services, as evidenced by the interviews. These agencies are structured with dedicated teams for rural story research, content operations, dubbing, and technical support. When asked about their operations, a creative agency director explained:

> Our company consists of about 10 employees in total, and the division of labour includes dubbing, operations, filming, etc. We are mainly concentrated in Guangzong area of Xingtai City. After some research on some local stories about agriculture, rural areas and farmers, we will discuss what are the highlights and what promotion value they have. After the research, a brief summary of feasibility will be made. We are currently using film and television shooting techniques, and our equipment is very professional […] We have independent data operations and professional dubbing artists for the Douyin platform […] We strive to allow rural creators to tell stories that accurately restore local history and current conditions (UI-MCI-15, 13 February 2024).

These creative agencies employ operations specialists who analyse platform data alongside specialists who focus on local story research in rural areas. Combined with the previously discussed interaction between RYPs and the platform algorithm, the former may help demystify the 'black box' of Douyin's algorithm, while the latter ensures rural stories are represented accurately. Therefore, the combination of professional expertise and RYPs engagement enables this collaborative model to develop a relatively comprehensive understanding of 'the whole picture – the social, cultural, marketing, and analytical side' (Hutchinson, 2023, p. 43).

From the perspective of RYPs, creative agencies are positively perceived for their ability to enhance both the technical and strategic dimensions of video production. Participants emphasised the professional advantages these agencies provide:

> I think it would be better to use the services of MCN organisation or other organisations, which will be more conducive to my development. Just like maybe when my fans are accumulating more and more, I will definitely need such an organisation to help me develop faster (SI-RYP-12, 30 September 2023).

> I think we rural people still don't know much about the algorithms, traffic, and recommendation mechanisms on the Douyin platform. But these people [from creative agencies] are more professional. They all have a professional background, can use a lot of good photography equipment, and know what kind of videos will be pushed. In summary, they are more professional (SI-RYP-11, 20 September 2023).

These perspectives demonstrate that RYPs value the expertise of creative agencies in navigating Douyin's complex algorithmic environment, even though these services often involve financial costs. However, while creative agencies enhance the visibility of rural producers, their involvement raises questions about the inclusivity of their processes and the potential epistemological tensions they may introduce for rural cultural representation.

In my interviews, this drawback comes from the fact that creative agency members may themselves be non-rural people and are attached to their own professional knowledge and insistence on what is the 'authoritative' content of rural short videos. To some extent, this creates a trade-off for RYPs when choosing to collaborate with creative agencies. This tension was evident in an interview with a creative agency director who critiqued certain rural content as 'vulgar':

> Nowadays, the distortion of people's values or the lack of belief makes people live and work in a stressful life, making them want to watch some alternative things in their spare time. This is the case for some rural internet celebrities, and there is nothing we can do about it, but I don't appreciate it. I think this is not a long-term approach. As time goes by, more and more high-quality works with positive energy will appear on Douyin, and the vulgar ones will gradually

> become marginalised. For example, in some rural skits, there are conflicts between sons and fathers, and there are some rude behaviours. This is a wrong value orientation that only captures our temporary attention. It is not a thing of human development. If someone worships such an internet celebrity, his values may be of low taste (UI-MCI-15, 13 February 2024).

From this explanation, it is clear that the director maintains a particular conception of which rural stories are authoritative and worth promoting. He equates 'quality work' with 'positive energy' and characterises content that is negative-oriented or designed purely to attract attention as 'alternative' and 'vulgar'. This aligns with the earlier discussion in this chapter regarding RYPs' accumulation of political capital: RYPs engage in a negotiated practice of both consent and resistance to the ideological framing of 'positive energy' on the Douyin platform. In doing so, they may implicitly endorse its association with high-quality content while aligning their productions with broader national ideological narratives. The consequence of this dynamic may not only marginalise certain RYPs' experiences of cultural production on Douyin but may also compromise their subjectivity as rural creators when representing rural-related issues.

The perspectives of creative agencies on what constitutes 'alternative' or 'vulgar' content often reflect an elitist stance. Drawing on a wide body of cultural research, including foundational work by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), it becomes evident that the popularity of rural short video culture should not be judged solely through such a critical lens. Instead, it is essential to interpret this phenomenon through the lived experiences of RYPs engaged in cultural production. Rural short video content functions not only as a representation of rural life but also as a site where creators actively deconstruct and reimagine rural realities.

This process unfolds through the interaction between RYPs, the Douyin platform's automation mechanisms, and the broader framework of national cultural governance. Within this dynamic, the role of creative agencies is significant. Specifically, they assist RYPs in navigating and deconstructing the 'black box' of platform algorithms. By offering technical expertise and leveraging their commercial and professional knowledge, these agencies facilitate access to greater visibility and platform optimisation.

However, this relationship is not without challenges. The commercial orientation and professional authority of creative agencies may inadvertently impose an elitist perspective, potentially undermining the creative autonomy of RYPs. As one participant noted:

> My creative process is no longer so arbitrary. Sometimes I just shoot whatever they [creative agencies] ask me to shoot (SI-RYP-6 @二猪的故事, 21 July 2023).

This statement underscores the tension between the structured approach of creative agencies and the RYPs' desire for self-directed cultural expression. While agencies provide valuable guidance and expertise, their influence can constrain the creative freedom of rural youth, redirecting their work to align with market-driven or algorithmically favoured formats rather than the creators' original artistic or cultural intentions.

Although only one interview with a creative agency staff member was conducted, the concerns raised are noteworthy. The participation of creative agencies introduces a potential crisis that directly impacts the cultural production process within the digital intermediary environment of RYPs. This crisis operates across multiple layers of the rural short video ecosystem: from shaping video content and form, to influencing interactions between producers, algorithms, and audiences. It ultimately extends to the broader ecology of rural short video culture.

Understanding this trajectory, from the creative agency to the RYPs, from the RYPs to the platform algorithm, and from the algorithm to the audience, reveals how the involvement of creative agencies can both enhance and complicate the production and dissemination of rural short videos. While their expertise can help RYPs optimise visibility and engagement on Douyin, their elitist perspectives and commercial motives may simultaneously affect the authenticity and cultural integrity of rural narratives.

The findings indicate that the participation of newly emerging creative agencies in the rural creative economy plays a significant role in shaping rural cultural production. By providing technical expertise, algorithmic insights, and strategic guidance, these agencies act as intermediaries between RYPs and the platform, enhancing both the visibility and commercial potential of rural content (Cunningham, Craig and Silver, 2016; Lin and de Kloet, 2019). At the same time, their involvement introduces normative and aesthetic

pressures, as decisions regarding what constitutes ‘quality’ or ‘authoritative’ content may prioritise marketable, algorithm-friendly, or ideologically aligned narratives over locally grounded or experimental forms of expression. Consequently, creative agencies function as both enablers and gatekeepers, shaping not only the form and reach of rural short videos but also the scope of cultural autonomy and authenticity within the rural creative ecosystem.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an in-depth examination of RYPs’ cultural production experiences on the Douyin platform, emphasising their active engagement in economic, social, and political capital accumulation. Drawing on interviews and theoretical insights, it is evident that RYPs’ participation extends beyond content creation, reflecting a nuanced interaction with the broader cultural ecology of rural China shaped by ‘digital intermediation’.

The pursuit of economic capital remains a core motivation for RYPs, as Douyin facilitates innovative ways to commercialise traditional agricultural practices. This aligns with the Chinese government’s advocacy of the ‘Internet + Agriculture’ model in its ‘Rural Digital Development Strategy’, which aims to ‘promote the transformation and upgrading of the whole agricultural industry chain through the effective and intelligent internet operation platform’ (Liu, 2020, p. 77). By leveraging Douyin’s e-commerce features, RYPs not only enhance rural livelihoods but also elevate their local social status as ‘Douyin internet celebrities’, reinforcing their roles as cultural and economic agents within their communities. However, this transformation also reflects broader trends in Chinese ‘platform ruralism’ (Wang, Xu, and Liu, 2022; Zhang and Qian, 2024), where digital platforms mediate local cultures and economies for broader consumption.

Simultaneously, RYPs navigate the complex relationship between cultural production and political discourse, employing strategies of consent and resistance to comply with Douyin’s preference for ‘positive energy’ narratives while subtly embedding serious topics through humour and indirect storytelling. This dual approach resonates with broader patterns in cultural intermediation, where creators balance compliance with state ideologies and the pursuit of authenticity (Yi, 2023) in digital cultural production.

Central to these dynamics is RYPs' interaction with Douyin's algorithm, which governs visibility and engagement in ways that are both enabling and constraining. While the algorithm facilitates content dissemination, its opaque nature reinforces RYPs' reliance on traffic metrics as a measure of success. Despite their limited technical understanding of these systems, RYPs exercise agency by strategically diversifying their content and preserving thematic integrity, ensuring their work resonates culturally while meeting platform demands (Hutchinson, 2023).

The involvement of creative agencies introduces another layer of complexity. These agencies provide vital technical and strategic support, such as data analytics and content optimisation, enabling RYPs to navigate platform demands more effectively. However, the imposition of external perspectives may risk diluting the authenticity of rural cultural narratives (Fung, He, and Cao, 2022), reflecting an epistemological tension in which rural producers negotiate their roles as both creators and cultural representatives.

These intersecting dynamics, RYPs' agency, algorithmic imperatives, national ideological constraints, and the influence of creative agencies, highlight the complexities of digital intermediation as a relational process. As Hutchinson (2023) notes, digital intermediation involves the continuous exchange of power and value across technologies, institutions, and users, shaping the production and consumption of cultural content. Within this ecosystem, RYPs engage in a cyclical dynamic in which content is created to align with algorithmic demands, algorithms respond to audience preferences, and audiences sustain long-term engagement with RYPs.

In sum, the findings of this chapter demonstrate the transformative yet contested nature of RYPs' participation in digital intermediation. By integrating traditional rural practices with digital innovation, RYPs contribute to rural modernisation while actively negotiating the tensions inherent in platform-mediated environments. At the same time, the reliance on opaque algorithms, the influence of creative agencies, and the constraints imposed by national ideologies illustrate the ongoing negotiation between agency and structure (Zhang and Qian, 2024) in the digital cultural economy. Ultimately, RYPs' experiences reflect both the possibilities and challenges of cultural production in the digital age, highlighting their resilience, adaptability, and capacity to shape the narratives of rural China.

Chapter Seven: Conclusion

Although China's rural policies have promoted the spread of ICTs, such as internet infrastructure, in rural areas since the early 21st century, the period from 2018 to the end of the pandemic witnessed a notable acceleration in efforts by companies like ByteDance to reshape rural cultural production. As a distinct form of cultural product, rural short videos gained visibility through the rapid development of Douyin, one of ByteDance's flagship platforms. Judging by their popularity, content, and diversity of form, rural short videos have emerged as a primary medium for presenting rural digital culture in this historical period.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the cultural practices and experiences of rural youth producers, the principal creators of rural short videos on Douyin, and how their work shapes cultural production, form, and dissemination. While there is considerable overlap between RYPs and Douyin users more broadly, the focus on the former highlights their unique institutional and social positioning. Unlike viewers or end-users, RYPs who rely on Douyin must continually adapt to the platform's evolving business models, algorithmic systems, and regulatory mechanisms, which are in turn influenced by national policies. It is precisely within this adaptive process that their vitality and creative agency emerge.

To explore the practices, power flows, and relationships underpinning short video production, this study adopts an interdisciplinary approach, drawing on insights from policy analysis, media studies, cultural studies, economics, and sociology. Research across these disciplines has independently illuminated issues such as the social life of rural youth, shifts in national rural policies, and the interplay between platforms and cultural producers. This study seeks to bring these perspectives into dialogue around the phenomenon of rural short videos.

Guided by three research questions, the study examines how media mechanisms and infrastructures, national policies, and governance measures are fundamentally intertwined with the transformation of thematic content, creative practices, and the personal development of RYPs. The following sections present the answers to these research questions.

Summary of Key Findings

- Answers to RQ1: How have Chinese national rural policies since 2018 shaped the digital development of rural areas, and in what ways does the Douyin platform mediate policy dissemination and influence rural short video production?

My research demonstrates a significant transformation in Chinese rural cultural policy since 2018, highlighting a shift towards digitalisation that has reshaped rural governance, infrastructure, and cultural production. Historically, rural policies prioritised urban development, often treating rural culture as secondary. The introduction of the 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' in 2018 marked a turning point, integrating digital tools into rural governance, e-commerce, and cultural revitalisation. Key strategies included the expansion of broadband networks, promotion of rural e-commerce, and initiatives to enhance digital literacy, all aimed at narrowing the urban-rural digital divide. However, my findings indicate that these policies, while creating new opportunities, may also replicate existing socio-economic inequalities due to uneven access to digital infrastructure and skills.

I argue that rural policies are not implemented in a purely top-down fashion but are actively mediated by digital platforms, with Douyin serving as a critical 'policy filter'. While national strategies set broad objectives, such as fostering digital literacy and promoting rural e-commerce, Douyin operationalises these goals through platform governance mechanisms. Initiatives like the New Farmer Plan exemplify this process, offering RYPs algorithmic traffic boosts, training, and monetisation tools aligned with national rural development strategies. Unlike previous research (Haveri and Anttiroiko, 2021; Shi, Zhang, and Jiang, 2023), which focuses primarily on urban digital economies, this study highlights rural digital governance, emphasising how platforms like Douyin not only facilitate content production but also actively shape cultural expression and economic opportunities for rural youth. However, these mechanisms privilege commercially viable and policy-aligned content, ensuring that narratives reflecting state priorities, such as 'Core Socialist Values' and 'China's Excellent Traditional Culture', are more visible and rewarded.

My analysis reveals a broader shift in rural cultural governance, challenging the traditional top-down policy model. Historically, rural culture was shaped primarily by state-driven ideological education and economic priorities. In contrast, I find that digital platforms have

introduced a bottom-up participatory element, enabling rural youth to engage in digital storytelling, economic activities, and cultural expression. This shift reflects broader debates in cultural policy and governance, where platformisation complicates the state's control over cultural narratives. Yet, while this model introduces participatory dynamics, Douyin's interventions often reinforce state-defined narratives rather than facilitating genuinely grassroots expression. These findings contribute to emerging discussions on digital cultural policy and the regulation of cultural production in platform societies (Valtysson, 2020), demonstrating how digital platforms mediate state-driven policies and foster a governance shift from top-down control to multi-stakeholder regulation.

- Answers to RQ2: What are the expressive forms of rural short videos and how do rural youth producers construct the digital rural scene?

Through a thematic analysis of 300 rural short videos under the hashtag #Rurallife on Douyin, I identified four dominant expressive forms—*Rural Family Drama, Rural Sitcom*, *Rural Video Blog*, and *Rural Short Documentary*. These categories reveal how RYPs strategically employ digital storytelling to construct representations of rural life, negotiate cultural subjectivity, and engage with broader socio-political discourses. The findings demonstrate that rural short videos function as a crucial medium through which RYPs shape public understandings of contemporary rurality, reflecting both grassroots creativity and the influence of platform governance.

A key finding is that rural short videos closely engage with traditional media genres while adapting to the affordances and constraints of digital platforms, which expands theoretical discussions on platformised cultural production by demonstrating how rural youth blend traditional storytelling with digital affordances, reinforcing existing work on platform governance and creative labour (Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Lin and de Kloet, 2019). Across the four thematic categories, Douyin's creative features have fostered recurring creative strategies. For instance, text overlays, stickers, and background music are widely employed to emphasise emotion, rhythm, and humour, while editing tools such as jump cuts and filters enhance visual dynamism and narrative clarity. These creative editing features take on distinct narrative and social functions within each type of short video. In family dramas, they evoke emotional resonance; in sitcoms, they amplify collective humour; in vlogs, they support self-expression; and in documentaries, they highlight and aestheticise everyday rural

life. This interplay of shared aesthetic logic and genre-specific innovation demonstrates how RYPs strategically leverage platform affordances to enrich both storytelling and audience engagement.

Rural Family Drama (39% of analysed videos) is the most dominant expressive form, portraying intergenerational relationships and family values. These videos centre on two main themes: reciprocal filial piety and responsibilities and cohesion. *Reciprocal filial piety* narratives emphasise Confucian traditions of respect and care for elders, reflecting a shift from hierarchical obedience toward a more modernised notion of intergenerational reciprocity. This transformation aligns with the 'Core Socialist Values' promoted by state policies, integrating tradition with contemporary social governance. Videos emphasising *responsibilities and cohesion* focus on peer relationships within rural families, particularly financial and caregiving obligations among siblings. Many of these narratives relate to the New Rural Pension Scheme (NRPS), which has reduced economic burdens on rural youth by providing state-sponsored support for the elderly. These findings suggest that such videos not only reflect but actively shape public discourse around family responsibility, positioning digital storytelling as a tool for cultural negotiation and policy alignment.

Rural Sitcoms (28.7%) are characterised by humour, exaggeration, and serialised storytelling. Central themes include *expressions of trust* and *rural festivals*, reinforcing communal cohesion. Trust narratives depict strong social bonds within rural communities, countering stereotypes of rural backwardness and isolation, and reflecting Putnam's (2007) theory of bonding through the accumulation of social capital, where community trust is reinforced through shared identity and geographic proximity. Humour plays a critical role in these videos, functioning both as entertainment and as a rhetorical device that makes rural content accessible to wider audiences. Similarly, rural festival videos creatively reinterpret traditional customs, blending contemporary digital aesthetics with age-old communal practices. These videos demonstrate how RYPs use platform-mediated cultural production to preserve and adapt rural traditions in a digital environment.

Rural Video Blogs (Vlogs) (15%) function as spaces for self-representation and identity negotiation, which can be divided into two subtypes: *factual reality talking* and *non-verbal reality record*. Factual reality videos feature 'direct-to-camera' narration in which rural youth discuss personal experiences, social issues, or reflections on rural life, making

underrepresented rural voices visible in public discourse (Besley, 2010). Non-verbal reality videos, by contrast, rely on imagery, gestures, and symbolic cues rather than spoken words, creating an aestheticised rural experience in which landscapes and daily activities evoke nostalgia and romanticised notions of rurality. Linguistic adaptation, particularly the shift from local dialects to non-standard Mandarin, demonstrates RYPs' efforts to increase accessibility while maintaining cultural authenticity.

Rural Short Documentaries (16.3%) employ observational and participatory storytelling techniques to capture rural life. *Observational documentaries* feature slow-paced, visually rich montages that highlight the beauty and simplicity of rural environments, reflecting Castellò's (2023) concept of the 'agentic rural', in which rural spaces are portrayed as both resilient and idyllic rather than stagnant. *Participatory documentaries* integrate human interaction into the narrative, emphasising the dynamic and evolving nature of rural communities. These videos resonate with Sudbury's (2015) work on participatory filmmaking as a means of community empowerment, illustrating how RYPs leverage digital media to construct shared and agentic narratives of rural identity.

My analysis demonstrates that these expressive forms advance debates on digital rurality in China (Cao and Cao, 2021; Zhou and Liu, 2021) by conceptualising the 'digital public rural sphere' as a negotiated space shaped through the interplay of grassroots creativity, platform governance, and state policy. Unlike earlier representations of rural life, which were predominantly mediated by state media, commercial cinema, and urban-centric narratives, the 'digital public rural sphere' emerges as a semi-public, digitally mediated space in which rural youth actively create, circulate, and negotiate cultural and social discourse related to rural life. It is distinct from both historical media portrayals and traditional rural cultural practices, as it is mediated by platform governance, algorithmic filtering, and interactive audience engagement. Consequently, this sphere represents an evolving, co-constructed phenomenon, reflecting the simultaneous influence of grassroots agency and external regulatory forces.

This digital rural scene is characterised by two key dynamics. The first is a discourse of 'deindustrialisation', in which rurality is framed as an unmodernised, idyllic space, despite ongoing economic and infrastructural transformations in contemporary China. My findings reveal that RYPs frequently omit representations of rural industrialisation, mechanised

agriculture, and urban migration, instead emphasising pastoral landscapes, small-scale farming, traditional handicrafts, and intergenerational family life. This aestheticised portrayal aligns with the ideological framework of China's *Rural Revitalisation Strategy*, which seeks to rebrand the countryside as a site of cultural heritage, social harmony, and ecological sustainability. However, while this selective representation contributes to a romanticised vision of rural life, it also generates a representational paradox: on one hand, it provides a counter-narrative to dominant discourses of rural decline; on the other, it risks essentialising rurality as a timeless and static construct, detached from the realities of labour migration, rural entrepreneurship, and the uneven effects of digital economic policies. The discourse of deindustrialisation, therefore, is not merely a grassroots aesthetic choice but a negotiated form of cultural production that simultaneously accommodates and resists state-led ideological imperatives.

The second dynamic shaping rural discourses in the 'digital public rural sphere' is a negotiated rhetoric, whereby RYPs strategically employ linguistic devices, moral themes, and humour to align their content with state narratives while retaining creative autonomy. My analysis found that many rural short videos adopt a hybrid linguistic approach, blending dialect expressions with standardised Mandarin to appeal simultaneously to local and national audiences. This code-switching functions as a form of cultural translation, enabling RYPs to preserve rural authenticity while ensuring broader accessibility. Humour also plays a pivotal role, acting as a subtle critique of urban–rural inequalities, generational tensions, and shifting social norms. Rather than constituting overt resistance, humour allows RYPs to address socio-economic anxieties delicately while remaining within the constraints of platform and state regulations. Moreover, moral storytelling, particularly narratives emphasising family duty, industriousness, and communal solidarity, serves as a bridge between grassroots cultural expression and state-promoted values, reinforcing the ideological alignment between rural digital content and official discourses on social harmony.

In sum, my findings indicate that rural short videos on Douyin constitute more than merely fragmented digital content; they represent a dynamic and evolving form of cultural production that navigates the interplay between state governance, platform algorithmic control, and grassroots agency. These findings enhance our understanding of vernacular cultural governance, demonstrating how rural short videos function simultaneously as

grassroots media practices and as extensions of national ideological projects (Fung, He, and Cao, 2022). My analysis reveals that through digital storytelling, RYPs do not simply reproduce dominant discourses but engage in selective appropriation, blending policy-aligned narratives with creative subversions to present an idealised yet adaptable rural identity that resonates with both local and national audiences.

- Answers to RQ3 How do rural youth producers participate in the digital intermediation process and how do interactions in this process influence their continued production?

My findings illustrate that Douyin's technological affordances, algorithmic structures, and governance mechanisms play a central role in shaping how RYPs engage with the platform, influencing their capacity to convert digital engagement into economic, social, and political capital. This research builds on existing discussions of 'platformisation' (Helmond, 2015; Nieborg and Poell, 2018; Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, 2021) and 'digital intermediation' (Hutchinson, 2023), situating RYPs' experiences within broader debates about how digital platforms mediate access, visibility, and capital accumulation.

First, digital intermediation provides RYPs with an alternative pathway for economic capital accumulation, enabling them to integrate digital labour with rural livelihoods. My findings show that RYPs employ two interconnected economic strategies: short video commerce and personal branding. Many RYPs utilise Douyin's e-commerce functions to sell agricultural products, transforming traditional farming practices into digitalised entrepreneurial models. This aligns with the Chinese government's 'Internet + Agriculture' initiative, which seeks to modernise rural economies through digital technologies (Liu, 2020). Beyond direct revenue generation, RYPs accumulate intangible economic capital by cultivating an engaged audience and enhancing their personal brand, which sustains long-term economic opportunities. However, structural barriers, including dependence on platform-controlled traffic, market saturation, and algorithmic unpredictability, pose ongoing challenges. These findings contribute to broader discussions on rural digital economies (Fung, He, and Cao, 2022; Sun and Meng, 2023), illustrating how rural creators must continually balance creative labour with algorithmic demands to maintain financial sustainability.

Second, RYPs accumulate social capital through both online and offline engagements. While existing literature primarily emphasises digital interactions as the main avenue for social capital accumulation (Ji, 2021), my research highlights the importance of offline recognition.

Many RYPs report that their digital presence enhances their reputation within local communities, leading to increased participation in community events, strengthened social ties, and elevated social standing. This finding challenges urban-centric narratives about digital entrepreneurship, demonstrating that online visibility can translate into locally grounded social influence. Furthermore, my research supports a dual-layered model of social capital: bonding social capital, wherein digital participation strengthens intra-community ties, and bridging social capital, whereby RYPs connect rural communities to broader digital networks (Tiwari, Lane, and Alam, 2019). These insights expand theoretical discussions on rural digital engagement, showing that short video production is not solely an online phenomenon but also an embodied social practice that reshapes local rural dynamics.

Third, RYPs accumulate political capital through strategic engagement with platform regulations and state ideologies. My findings reveal that they operate within an 'ideological negotiation zone', balancing consent and resistance in relation to state narratives. On one hand, RYPs align their content with state-promoted discourses, such as positive energy and rural revitalisation, to ensure platform visibility and avoid censorship (Chen, Kaye, and Zeng, 2021). On the other hand, they employ subtle strategies of resistance, such as humour, metaphor, and indirect storytelling, to address sensitive issues, including rural hardship and social inequality, while remaining within ideological boundaries. This nuanced negotiation demonstrates that rural digital creators do not passively conform to state narratives but actively shape their engagement with digital platforms to maximise creative autonomy. These findings contribute to scholarship on digital governance and ideological mediation, illustrating how rural creators navigate a platformised political economy (Triggs, 2019).

Beyond these core findings, my research highlights the centrality of algorithmic culture in shaping RYPs' experiences on Douyin. Interviews with RYPs indicate that while they possess a basic understanding of how algorithms influence content distribution, their knowledge remains limited due to the 'black-box' nature of Douyin's recommendation system (Pasquale, 2015). This aligns with broader critiques of algorithmic governance, which emphasise the asymmetrical power dynamics between platform users and platform corporations (Gillespie, 2016; Crawford, 2021). Nonetheless, my study also demonstrates that RYPs engage in strategic resistance to algorithmic categorisation. Rather than passively accepting platform-imposed labels, they deliberately diversify their content to evade rigid classification, thereby securing greater exposure and thematic flexibility. This finding

contributes to scholarship on algorithmic agency (Rogers, 2018), showing that platform users actively negotiate with automated systems to optimise content visibility.

Another significant contribution of this research is its examination of the role of creative agencies and MCNs (Multichannel Networks) in rural short video production. My findings reveal that many RYPs collaborate with creative agencies that provide data analytics, content strategy, and professional filming support. While these agencies enhance production quality and algorithmic optimisation, they also introduce new forms of gatekeeping. Interviews with RYPs indicate that creative agencies often impose external expectations on content style and narrative, potentially diluting the authenticity of rural storytelling. This extends existing debates on platform economies (Cunningham, Craig, and Silver, 2016; Hutchinson, 2023), illustrating that digital intermediation involves not only user-platform interactions but also institutional actors that shape cultural production.

In the following sections of this conclusion chapter, I reflect on the principal elements of my findings and outline an agenda for future research on platform-based cultural production in rural China. I first examine, from an institutional perspective, how power is transferred when cultural production, dissemination, and monetisation in rural China are organised through the Douyin platform. Then, from the perspective of cultural practices, I explore how power circulates in interactions between the Douyin platform, RYPs, and other stakeholders. Finally, I consider the implications of contemporary rural short video culture for the economic and social structures of rural society.

Douyin's Institutional Power

The Douyin platform undeniably provides rural young producers (RYPs) with unprecedented opportunities for open expression. This accessibility is a key factor in Douyin's emergence as a central actor in the rural cultural industry, particularly in the dissemination of rural-themed audiovisual content. The platform's capacity to attract and retain a substantial number of rural young users reinforces its role in shaping and amplifying rural digital culture. As revealed in interviews with RYPs, Douyin functions as an open marketplace for rural content, enabling these creators to reach a broad audience that extends beyond rural communities to include urban users. This expansive and diverse demand base significantly enlarges the rural short video market. In China, where Douyin enjoys immense

popularity, this national-scale audience lowers traditional economic and infrastructural barriers, granting RYPs unprecedented access to a wide consumer base for rural cultural production.

However, the accessibility of Douyin's platform comes with its own constraints. To fully benefit from the platform, RYPs must integrate into Douyin's business model. As explored in Chapter 6, while RYPs accumulate economic capital through short video production, their visibility is governed by algorithm-driven recommendation mechanisms. The platform also structures key stages of the creative process, from video editing (using filters, sound effects, and visual effects) to participation in initiatives such as the *New Farmer Plan* and the strategic use of rural hashtags. Even monetisation strategies, as examined in Chapter 6, are fundamentally bound to Douyin's platform logic. The highly integrated 'boundary resources' (Ghazawneh and Henfridsson, 2013) embedded in Douyin may render RYPs increasingly dependent on the platform, while the broader relational networks sustaining rural digital culture, both online and offline, also rely on Douyin for maintenance. This dependency is further reinforced by the economic imperative to minimise operational costs and maximise benefits, aligning RYPs' incentives with Douyin's monopolistic control over rural digital content distribution.

The decentralisation of media control over rural content through Douyin indicates a notable shift in power dynamics. Traditionally, rural content was mediated by legacy media institutions; now, a broader range of participants, including agricultural workers, migrant rural youth, and independent creators, can publish content freely. However, this shift does not signify a full democratisation of rural cultural production. As discussed in Chapter 6, RYPs actively engage with Douyin's algorithm to enhance visibility, often by participating in platform-driven campaigns or strategically employing hashtags. Yet, the 'black box' nature of the algorithm functions as an opaque, non-human gatekeeper, complicating creators' ability to anticipate or influence their content's reach. As competition intensifies among an expanding cohort of rural content creators, market pressures have encouraged professional agencies to monetise the creative process, prompting RYPs to invest additional resources to remain visible and viable (Duffy, 2017). These hidden costs underscore the evolving and often constrained relationship between RYPs and the platform's power structures.

Another crucial dimension of Douyin's influence over rural cultural content lies in its infrastructural and political power. Interviews with RYPs indicate that concerns over visibility, as well as compliance with government policies, significantly shape their content strategies. As explored in Chapter 6, RYPs adopt negotiated approaches to participate in the transformation of rural discourses. Because rural short video production and consumption are inherently dependent on the platform market, Douyin ultimately determines who can participate and under what conditions. The *New Farmer Plan*, analysed in Chapter 4, exemplifies this power by directly influencing the visibility of rural content through curated themes and algorithmic adjustments. Moreover, Douyin functions as a 'policy filter', embedding national rural development policies into its governance model. This regulatory role extends across platform infrastructure, where political considerations shape content moderation, recommendation algorithms, and monetisation strategies. The intertwining of Douyin's curation mechanisms with national rural digital development policies ensures that the platform remains aligned with broader governmental objectives.

However, this decentralisation of media control does not equate to the democratisation of rural content production, nor do RYPs perceive it as such. As shown in Chapter 6, although RYPs attempt to understand the algorithm, by participating in platform activities or strategically employing hashtags, the black-box nature of these systems renders them opaque, non-human gatekeepers. Navigating this opacity imposes hidden costs, which escalate as competition intensifies within the growing rural short video market. This pressure incentivises creative agencies to monetise the production process, compelling RYPs to invest increasing resources to maintain visibility and access platform opportunities (Duffy, 2017). These hidden costs constitute a primary source of concern for RYPs navigating this evolving power relationship.

It is also important to recognise that Douyin's integration of political factors helps sustain RYPs' presence on the platform. Were the platform to operate solely on commercial interests, cultural production could become unstable (Arriagada and Ibanez, 2020). This is particularly evident in the rigidity of Douyin's algorithmic logic and monetisation systems, which are difficult to alter without disrupting the platform's operational framework (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2021). Douyin's alignment with national initiatives, such as the *New Farmer Plan*, has contributed to its sustained support for rural content. Unlike transient promotional campaigns, this continued engagement reflects a deliberate strategic compromise: Douyin

prioritises rural content development, to some extent, over broad user engagement, guided by governmental interventions in platform governance. Consequently, within the context of China's rural revitalisation and digital development strategies, the consolidation of Douyin's infrastructural and political power paradoxically creates opportunities for RYPs to maintain sustainable livelihoods, ensuring that rural cultural producers remain economically relevant within the platform ecosystem.

Rural Youth Producers' Productive Power

While the previous discussion highlighted Douyin's infrastructural and political power in shaping rural cultural information flows, this section shifts focus to the producer side, examining the creative agency of RYPs. This exploration centres on the productive power (Foucault, 2012) of RYPs and their meaning-making logic in rural short video production. I conceptualise this logic as a process in which RYPs' cultural subjectivity and creativity serve as the starting point; their engagement with Douyin's infrastructure adds value to their content, which is subsequently curated through regulatory choices shaped by national policies and platform governance. These elements collectively form rural cultural products. The production process is primarily shaped by four factors: visibility, creative agency, platform infrastructure, and national policy. At this stage, RYPs appear to have internalised this production logic as part of their pursuit of profit.

Previous research (Leontovich and Kotelnikova, 2022; Lin and de Kloet, 2019; Chen, Kaye, and Zeng, 2021; Zhao, 2023) has highlighted persistent structural inequalities and issues of rural subjectivity in short video cultural production, particularly given the dominant role of platforms. I argue that RYPs' cultural production is neither purely individualistic nor fully collectivist, in part due to the absence of regulatory oversight and legal protections for content creators on Douyin. This institutional gap has contributed to the fragmentation of this producer group. Interviews reveal that many rural short videos are produced collaboratively, with team members undertaking distinct roles such as acting, scriptwriting, or technical operations. Despite the economic visibility of these 'rural teams', their political and structural presence remains largely obscured. From the audience's perspective, the composition and contributions of these teams are often unclear, making it difficult to assess their creative influence on the final product. This opacity raises concerns about the maintenance of rural cultural autonomy and creative agency within this complex ecosystem.

These concerns are further amplified by the involvement of creative agencies, as discussed in Chapter 5, emphasising that digital distribution on Douyin does not automatically guarantee visibility. Access to resources and operational scale continues to dictate how cultural content circulates (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, 2021). While creative agencies provide RYPs with deeper integration into Douyin's infrastructure, including algorithmic insights, they also possess distinct advantages in accessing boundary resources, such as operational expertise and promotional capital. This imbalance increases the likelihood of external intervention in rural short video production, potentially diluting RYPs' ownership and cultural subjectivity. As analysed in Chapter 5, such interventions can undermine creative autonomy and reshape the power dynamics of production. Moreover, initiatives like the *New Farmer Plan*, which require a minimum follower count of 10,000 for promotional benefits, reinforce structural barriers. Without formal organisational support, RYPs face considerable challenges: the commercialised and competitive nature of Douyin often generates 'cold start' problems (Zhang, Maekawa, and Hara, 2021), making it difficult for new entrants to gain traction.

In addition to commercial constraints, national policies exert a top-down normative influence on rural cultural production. Rural short videos, as a central component of China's digital rural governance strategy, are subject to collaborative regulation by both government entities and platform operators. Beyond market imperatives, these policy constraints further circumscribe creative autonomy. The influence of state-driven rural policies, as analysed in Chapter 4, is corroborated by direct interview evidence presented in Chapter 5. While the construction of rural discourses within Douyin's 'digital public rural sphere' suggests that RYPs have successfully extended their reach beyond traditional rural identities, this does not amount to an unrestricted 'creative public sphere' (Poell, Nieborg, and Duffy, 2021, p. 192). Instead, RYPs employ strategies such as emphasising deindustrialisation impressions and deploying negotiating rhetorics as central techniques in shaping rural discourse on Douyin. These strategies reflect deliberate attempts to universalise rural narratives while aligning them with broader public expectations.

Tensions, however, emerge when national discourse intersects or conflicts with local rural norms—particularly where rural socio-economic development interacts with wider national economic objectives. While RYPs strategically incorporate mainstream moral narratives to align with state-endorsed 'China's Excellent Traditional Culture', as outlined in the *Digital*

Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025), they simultaneously employ humour to navigate the rigidity of state narratives. These creative strategies of consent and resistance reveal the complex trade-offs RYPs must negotiate to maintain cultural subjectivity, creative freedom, visibility, and political engagement. Consequently, the productive power of RYPs is continually mediated, dispersed, and, at times, diluted across the processes of content creation, circulation, and reception.

This discussion points to a broader tripartite framework in the governance of rural cultural production, encompassing the state, digital platforms, and creative agencies. The state continues to exert normative and regulatory influence through policy guidance, moral imperatives, and ideological frameworks, including Core Socialist Values and the Rural Digital Development Strategy (Ren, 2023; Zhao, 2023). These interventions delineate both the permissible scope and the overarching objectives of rural cultural content, shaping the political and ethical parameters within which platforms and creative agencies operate. In this sense, the state functions as a supervisory and legitimising authority, embedding its priorities into the operational logic of platforms and informing the strategic decisions of creative intermediaries.

Digital platforms such as Douyin occupy a mediating position between state directives and producer creativity, translating policy objectives into algorithmic incentives and operational affordances (Poell, Nieborg & Duffy, 2021; Valtysson, 2022). By controlling visibility, monetisation opportunities, and content circulation, platforms actively structure the cultural economy of rural short videos. The dual role of the platform, as both a commercial actor and a quasi-policy agent, requires producers to navigate a complex ecology in which political legitimacy, audience engagement, and market success are interdependent. This mediating function has significant implications for RYPs' pursuit of authenticity, as creators must negotiate between self-expression, platform logic, and policy expectations to construct rural narratives that resonate with both audiences and governing bodies.

Finally, the involvement of creative agencies adds another layer of complexity, introducing intermediaries that professionalise, curate, and sometimes standardise rural cultural production (Cunningham, Craig and Silver, 2016; Lin and de Kloet, 2019). These agencies facilitate access to algorithmic insights, technical resources, and market opportunities, enabling RYPs to optimise reach and impact. At the same time, they may introduce epistemic

tensions, as decisions about what constitutes ‘authoritative’ or ‘high-quality’ content can impose external notions of taste, value, and authenticity. Together, the state, platforms, and creative agencies form a hybrid governance model in which rural cultural production is co-shaped by political imperatives, technological affordances, and commercial strategies. Recognising these interrelations opens a productive avenue for future research into the evolving political economy of rural digital creativity, the negotiation of authenticity, and the sustainability of participatory cultural practices in digitally mediated rural contexts.

Dynamics of Platform-dependency and Independency

In light of the institutional power of the Douyin platform and the constraints on RYPs’ productive agency, negotiating a balance between platform dependence and independent creative practices constitutes a complex and ongoing challenge for rural youth. In China, there has been relatively little scholarly discussion on platform-based cultural production as an emerging industry that rural groups could actively participate in. Globally, debates on platform-based cultural production continue across platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, X, TikTok, and YouTube. However, based on the findings of this research, I argue that it is more meaningful to examine how RYPs organise their practices at specific historical moments rather than speculate on the future trajectory of platform-based cultural production.

Rural short video production on Douyin in China exhibits dual characteristics. On one hand, it represents platform-based cultural production, comparable to similar practices on digital platforms worldwide. On the other, it embodies a novel approach to agricultural production and distribution, aligning with the government’s ‘Internet + Agriculture’ initiative. This study found that rural short videos remain largely dependent on Douyin across stages of creation, distribution, and monetisation. This dependence encompasses access to platform infrastructure, collaborative governance shaped by platform and policy alignment, and the platformisation of revenue channels, all of which generate specific tensions for RYPs.

At the same time, platform dependence has also created avenues for platform-independent practices. While navigating the constraints imposed by Douyin, RYPs have leveraged digital tools to develop alternative marketing and sales strategies outside the platform. Crucially, rural youth remain grounded in offline realities: the collection and filming of rural stories occur within rural communities, participation in offline training and activities continues, and

economic gains from platform monetisation are often realised through agricultural products cultivated locally. These offline dimensions highlight the dual nature of rural digital labour: although RYPs operate within platform-dependent structures, their creative work remains anchored in lived experience, producing forms of cultural and economic activity that exist independently of the platform. Thus, when considering rural short video production as a segmented industry, its characteristics are both platform-dependent and platform-independent. This duality reflects the tension and negotiation inherent in RYPs' engagement with digital infrastructures, illustrating how rural youth navigate the interplay between technological mediation and grounded, community-rooted cultural production.

The opportunity for platform-independent practices demonstrates that, despite the tensions created by excessive reliance on Douyin, rural short video culture continues to embody the essence of rural life. In China, the state and market are not entirely separate; rather, they are relatively integrated, as digital platforms operate within the scope of state regulation (Zhao, 2019). Consequently, platform-based cultural production varies across regions and historical periods depending on the degree of state involvement.

This context is deeply intertwined with China's rural development trajectory. Following the 1978 reforms of the national land system and changes in family structures, rural youth faced economic precarity, urban-rural cultural conflicts, and barriers to social mobility in urban labour markets. These structural challenges shaped the emergence of the *Smart* subculture discussed in Chapter 1, reflecting rural youth's negotiation of identity, economic survival, and cultural expression.

Analysis of rural short video production in this study demonstrates that contemporary rural cultural production is rooted in national rural policy shifts after 2018, with RYPs playing a pivotal role in sustaining the evolving digital economy within China's political agenda. Unlike traditional media producers, these young creators operate as largely self-taught digital entrepreneurs, managing multiple responsibilities including content creation, personal branding, audience engagement, and adaptation to platform governance and state regulations. They strategically employ storytelling techniques emphasising authenticity, nostalgia, and cultural heritage, appealing to urban audiences while preserving traditional rural narratives. This dual focus on cultural preservation and commercial viability generates

both opportunities and constraints, compelling RYPs to continuously innovate within the boundaries of algorithmic visibility and policy frameworks (Lin and de Kloet, 2019).

Specifically, Chapter 4 highlights a broader policy shift from urban-centred to rural-centred cultural governance, prioritising rural culture as a legitimate subject of national attention. Measures such as the regulation of rural digital culture and the promotion of rural narratives reflect an effort to reintegrate rural life into the mainstream of Chinese society. Unlike Western capitalist systems exemplified by the United States, China's governance model enables centralised control over economy, culture, and society. State-owned enterprises and agriculture function as instruments of macro-level governance, particularly in rural areas. Historical precedents, such as the deployment of urban youth to rural regions in the 1950s to serve national political and socio-economic objectives (Pan, 2005, pp. 159–162), illustrate the continuity of rural populations as focal points of state policy. Today, this emphasis persists in initiatives such as the annual *No. 1 Central Document* and the *Rural Revitalisation Strategy*, underscoring rural culture as a central component of national development and governance priorities.

Reflecting on Chapters 4, 5, and 6, it is evident that both the thematic content of rural short videos, particularly the use of moral discourse, and the interplay of policies and platform infrastructures in RYPs' production processes demonstrate the integration of local rural culture into China's mainstream social culture. This integration does not imply a detachment from rural roots or a diminished role for rural participants. On the contrary, rural short videos retain numerous regional characteristics while simultaneously reaching broader audiences and attracting more participants. This outcome reflects China's efforts to expand the boundaries of traditional rural culture and regulate rural social norms across diverse regions, as discussed in Chapter 4 regarding rural digital development and policy implementation.

Beyond cultural inclusion, this study highlights profound transformations in agricultural production facilitated by rural short video ecosystems on platforms like Douyin. As detailed in Chapter 6, platform-based online stores allow RYPs to bypass traditional intermediaries, creating direct connections between producers and consumers. This model not only expands sales channels for agricultural products but also enhances value-added potential, encouraging investment in production quality, product selection, and logistics (IAED, 2022, p. 20).

However, economic sustainability remains a central concern for RYPs. While some achieve success through brand endorsements and e-commerce partnerships, many face financial instability due to unpredictable revenue streams and algorithmic volatility. The pressure to balance market-driven demands with cultural authenticity further complicates their work. Prior research suggests that these labour conditions, characterised by precarious work, income volatility, and unequal access to platform resources, reinforce spatial and social inequalities in cultural labour markets, showing that rather than promoting social mobility, cultural industries often entrench existing class disparities (Oakley et al., 2017). Precarious work in the platform economy disproportionately affects rural youth, increasing economic insecurity and dependence on unstable digital revenue streams (Zhou and Liu, 2021). My research shows that this financial precarity is influenced by the commercialisation of Douyin, which is, however, moderated by rural digital development policies. These policies aim to empower rural creators by providing resources, guidance, and incentives, helping to stabilise their income. In response, RYPs can strategically utilise these policy frameworks alongside platform opportunities to mitigate financial risks and support more sustainable livelihoods.

Reflecting on these findings, rural short videos function both as a response to and a driver of socio-economic transformations in China's countryside. Their thematic content, particularly moral and cultural narratives, highlights the dynamic interplay between traditional rural life and digital modernity. While the platform economy offers new opportunities for rural youth, it also reinforces structural constraints that shape their creative and economic pathways. As the government continues to embed digital rural production within national policy frameworks, the future of rural content will be defined by ongoing negotiations among state control, platform governance, and the agency of rural producers. The capacity of RYPs to navigate these intersecting forces will determine not only their individual success but also the broader trajectory of China's rural digital culture.

Implications for Policy

This research underscores the complex interplay between digital cultural production, rural youth participation, and national policymaking in shaping China's evolving digital rural landscape. RYPs engaging with platforms such as Douyin expand rural cultural narratives, generate economic opportunities, and contribute to social capital formation. However, these transformations also pose significant governance and policy challenges. This section

considers implications for rural policy, focusing on digital infrastructure, economic sustainability, cultural governance, and participatory policymaking. Given the cultural, economic, and political contexts shaping policymaking (Alasuutari and Kangas, 2020), rural digital policies must be both responsive to local cultural dynamics and aligned with structural realities. Unlike in many Western nations, where decentralisation allows for regional policy autonomy, China's highly centralised governance structure necessitates that rural digital policies adhere to national objectives while accommodating regional differences.

Despite significant efforts, persistent disparities in digital infrastructure continue to hinder rural development. Early 21st-century ICT initiatives and the 2018 'Rural Digital Development Strategy' sought to improve accessibility, yet limited infrastructure has produced uneven digital literacy and participation, exacerbating rather than alleviating socio-economic inequalities. Equitable infrastructure development is essential for both cultural production and effective governance (Beauregard, 2018). China's state-led digital infrastructure policies, highlighted in the *No. 1 Central Document*, have invested heavily in rural broadband expansion as part of national revitalisation efforts. Nonetheless, disparities remain between technologically advanced eastern coastal regions and underdeveloped western provinces. Addressing these gaps requires targeted broadband initiatives to ensure uniform access, enabling rural populations to fully engage with digital culture. Complementary measures, such as localised digital training programs and subsidies for equipment and internet services, would equip rural youth with necessary skills and reduce economic barriers, fostering a more inclusive digital landscape.

The economic sustainability of rural cultural producers is closely tied to their dependence on digital platforms. Changes in platform policies, monetisation structures, and engagement algorithms create financial precarity for content creators (Dunna et al., 2022). In China's highly centralised digital market, dominant platforms such as Douyin wield significant control over content visibility and revenue generation, placing producers in a vulnerable position. Policies that support independent platforms are therefore essential to counterbalance the dominance of commercial giants (Mangset, 2018), while promoting multi-platform diversification through targeted policy interventions could mitigate risks and encourage competition. Structured incentive programs, such as the *New Farmer Plan*, have the potential to provide long-term economic stability by linking digital cultural production with traditional agricultural activities. This strategy not only sustains digital entrepreneurs

but also advances rural revitalisation by fostering productive synergies between the digital and agricultural economies.

A regulatory framework that is both adaptable to regional cultural variations and aligned with national identity is essential for fostering a resilient and dynamic rural digital culture. In China, cultural governance remains closely tied to the national ideological framework, requiring coordinated policies that uphold state identity narratives while supporting local creativity (Shen, 2022). The *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)* exemplifies this approach by actively integrating 'Core Socialist Values' and 'China's Excellent Traditional Culture' into digital rural governance, ensuring alignment with national objectives. However, enhancing the authenticity and sustainability of rural digital culture also demands a more active role for local communities in shaping their own cultural narratives. A governance framework that incorporates rural perspectives into policy formulation can strengthen cultural diversity while maintaining national coherence. This may involve refining content regulation policies to balance ideological oversight with creative freedom, allowing rural digital creators to authentically express local traditions within state-defined cultural priorities. Collaborative efforts between academic researchers and policymakers can further facilitate ongoing evaluations of the socio-cultural impacts of rural digital content production, ensuring that governance structures remain responsive and adaptable in an evolving digital landscape.

Furthermore, a structured feedback mechanism is essential to enable rural digital entrepreneurs to contribute insights on policy effectiveness and platform governance. Given China's top-down governance structure (Dubuc, 2023), proactive measures are needed to integrate local perspectives into national policymaking. Effective participatory governance requires platforms that allow rural digital entrepreneurs to provide direct input into regulatory evaluations and policy adjustments. Establishing regional advisory councils composed of RYPs, cultural scholars, and policymakers could foster a more inclusive approach to policy development. In addition, supporting research on localised cultural governance strategies (Žuvela and Vidovic, 2020) would help ensure that national policies remain responsive to regional needs and cultural specificities.

Limitations and future research

One of the primary limitations of this study is the representativeness and inherent bias of the sample. Since digital ethnography was used to browse rural short videos on the Douyin platform and to document observations through online diaries, the sampling includes highly visible content under hashtag #RuralLife. This approach ensures a browsing experience that mirrors real user interactions. However, this focus on relatively 'successful' rural producers—those who have achieved visibility and sustained production—has important implications for how the findings are interpreted. While such participants provide valuable insight into how creative entrepreneurship can emerge in rural China, they also represent a selective group positioned within the upper tiers of the digital attention economy. As a result, their experiences may not fully capture the challenges faced by less visible or unsuccessful producers, whose limited access to platform resources or network capital might constrain their participation in the digital creative economy.

This selection therefore restricts the extent to which broader claims can be made about sustainable job creation in China's creative sector. The producers included in this study may exemplify best-case scenarios of digital labour success rather than typical trajectories of rural youth engagement. Recognising this limitation, the findings are interpreted as indicative rather than representative, contributing to an understanding of 'potential pathways' for sustainable creative livelihoods rather than definitive evidence of their systemic viability. Future research could benefit from including both emerging and unsuccessful creators to examine more comprehensively the structural inequalities and precarity inherent in digital creative work.

Another significant limitation of this study is the absence of audience-focused data, which constrains the ability to draw robust conclusions about the broader social impact of rural short video production or the effectiveness of underlying rural digital policies. The research does not include direct evidence on viewers' reception, interpretation, or engagement beyond observable platform metrics such as likes, shares, and comments. Consequently, the extent to which platform-mediated rural narratives influence public perceptions, reinforce cultural values, or facilitate urban-rural understanding remains uncertain. While media content evolves continuously, it is well established that media representations can shape audiences' perceptions of reality and influence ideological interpretations (Gerbner and

Gross, 1976). Similarly, although the analysis demonstrates how Douyin operationalises state rural policies through platform governance and content incentives, it cannot fully assess whether these policies achieve their intended social and cultural objectives, given that platformised cultural production and audience reception are co-constitutive (Kung et al., 2025). Future research could address this gap by incorporating audience-centred approaches, such as qualitative interviews, comment-section analysis, surveys, or focus groups, to explore how rural digital content is received, interpreted, and mobilised across diverse user groups. Such studies would offer crucial insight into the sustainability of rural short video production, the resonance of policy-aligned content, and the broader socio-cultural impact of the 'digital public rural sphere'.

Additionally, the scope of policy analysis in this study is limited to high-level national policies, such as the *No.1 Central Document* and the *Digital Rural Development Action Plan (2022–2025)*. While these documents provide a broad strategic framework, they do not account for the influence of regional and mid-level policies on rural digital development. Future research should investigate provincial and municipal regulations to better understand how rural policies are operationalised across different administrative levels and how local socio-political and economic contexts shape the cultural production practices of rural young producers.

A further limitation concerns the study's technical understanding of platform infrastructure, particularly regarding recommendation algorithms. As highlighted by participants, these algorithms operate as 'black boxes', with their mechanisms remaining largely opaque from design to implementation. This opacity constrains the ability to fully analyse how certain content gains visibility and circulates within the platform ecosystem. Future research could benefit from interdisciplinary collaboration across the humanities, social sciences, and computer science. Engaging with computer scientists or conducting interviews with Douyin engineers and regulatory analysts could provide more nuanced insights into the role of algorithmic mediation in shaping rural digital cultural production.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Before the interview

Demographic information: Before the interview, participants' personal demographic information will be collected through the registration sheet, including Name, Douyin nikname or Douyin id, Education status, job, Date, Place, etc.). General introduction of the research aims dissemination, anonymity and candour.

Section A (Background information)

How is Douyin being used in your social circle, especially in rural areas?

What's your motivation to create Douyin short form videos?

How long have you used Douyin or other short form social medias?

What do you like the most when using Douyin platform?

Section B (Production and dissemination of rural short videos)

How do you choose the themes to create a particular video or a series? Where are your primary ideas come from?

In your creation history, have your themes and topics changed? Why did you change these?

When creating a rural video, do you have a habit to set a special rural scene? Mostly, what kind of rural scene would you like to show to your audiences?

How do you think the scene setting could help you to express your ideas of themes or topics in the short form videos?

Section C (Public Comments and Public Opinions)

On Douyin platform, where do you usually get feedback on the videos you create?

Who do you think are the main audiences of your videos? Did your target change in recent years?

How do you think about the opinions outside of the rural groups on your work?

What kind of opinions from the public on Douyin will affect you on production process?

Section D (Platform policy influence)

Are you aware of recent rural policies, such as the concept of rural digital development? Do you know how these policies support your use of the internet or content production on the platform?

Have you received any promotion when creating contents on Douyin? If yes, how do you participate in this kind of promotion? If not, do you know any promotion policy on the platform?

About the content regulation, do you know how this regulation was carried out on Douyin platform? Are there any changes in the past three years?

Do you think the content regulation has impacts on your video production and dissemination?

Do you face any issues in your or other rural-related contents production and dissemination process? How do you think the promotion and regulation policy make sense to deal with these issues?

Appendix B: CONSENT TO THE USE OF DATA

University of Glasgow, College of Arts Research Ethics Committee

I understand that Kun Fang is collecting data in the form of recorded interviews for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow. These data are being collected as part of a research project on Chinese rural short form video on Douyin for a Ph.D. thesis in the Centre for Cultural Policy Research at the University of Glasgow. Semi- structured interview is used as one of the research methods in this research for primary data collection. Verbal data recorded in the interviews will be transcribed and stored in a secure and appropriate environment during the full course of the research project, and for 10 years after the research has been completed.

I give my consent to the use of data for this purpose on the understanding that:

- I have the choice to leave any question unanswered.
- Project materials in both physical and electronic form will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage (locked physical storage; appropriately encrypted, password-protected devices and University user accounts) at all times.
- The materials will be retained in secure storage by the University for up to ten years for archival purposes. Consent forms will also be retained for the purposes of record.
- The materials may be used in future research and be cited and discussed in future publications, both print and online.
- Any material that is noted as off-the-record will be treated accordingly.
- I understand that once the data collected has been anonymised, then in accordance with General Data Protection Regulation I have no rights relating to the processing of the data unless I have legitimate grounds for concern that I remain directly identifiable from it.

Name of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature:

Signed by the contributor: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's name and email contact: Kun Fang, xxxxxxxx@student.gla.ac.uk

Supervisor's name: Dr. Lynn Whitaker, Lynn Whitaker (Lynn.Whitaker@glasgow.ac.uk) Dr. Melanie Selfe (Melanie.Selfe@glasgow.ac.uk)

Department address: Centre for Cultural Policy Research University of Glasgow 13 Professor Square, Glasgow, G12 8QQ

Appendix C: PLAIN LANGUAGE PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT (PIS)

Title of project and researcher details

Title: Douyin Short Videos and Chinese Rural Youth: Interpreting Platformed Rural Youth Cultural Production in Shifting Rural Policy Context

Researcher: Kun Fang

Supervisor: Dr Lynn Whitaker and Dr Melanie Selfe

Course: PhD in Media and Cultural Policy

Why have I been chosen?

You are being invited to take part in a research project into Chinese rural short form video on Douyin. You are being asked to take part because of your expertise experiences on the production of online contents on Douyin platform. Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the information on this page carefully. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

What will happen if you take part?

The purpose of this study is to explore how rural youth in China create rural related short form videos on Douyin. If you decide to take part, I will ask you some questions about the themes and styles of the contents, the public comments on the platform, and the platform's cultural policy. You do not have to answer any questions that you don't want to. This will take about 60 minutes. I will record your answers on a voice recorder so that afterwards I can listen carefully to what you said.

Do I have to take part?

You do not have to take part in this study, and if you decide not to, you will still be free to visit the venue. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know and I will not use any information you have given me.

Keeping information safe and private

I will keep the information from the interview in a locked cabinet or in a locked file on my computer.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

When I have gathered all of the information from everyone who is taking part, I will write about what I have learned in a thesis, which I have to complete for my postgraduate research studies. I will keep you and other participants updated with what I have found out about what you think about the online rural short form videos and cultural policy in China.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed and agreed by the College of Arts Research Ethics Committee, University of Glasgow

Contacts for further information

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask...

▪ me, Kun Fang

▪ or my supervisor, Dr Lynn Whitaker and Dr Melanie Selfe

▪ or the Ethics officer for the College of Arts

Thank you for reading this!

Appendix D: List of participants

SI: Semi-structured Interviews, based on the interview guide.

UI: Unstructured Interviews, based on some topics in detail.

RYP: Rural Youth Producer

MCI: Member of Creative Institution

No	Anonymous code or Douyin ID	Gender	Location	Duration	Interview date
1	SI-RYP-1	Male	Online	58 minutes	14 April 2023
2	SI-RYP-2	Male	Online	55 minutes	28 April 2023
3	SI-RYP-3	Male	Online	55 minutes	15 May 2023
4	SI-RYP-4@晓毅班长	Male	Online	43 minutes	23 June 2023
5	SI-RYP-5	Female	Online	50 minutes	28 June 2023
6	SI-RYP-6@二猪的故事	Male	Online	58 minutes	21 July 2023
7	SI-RYP-7	Male	Online	1 hours 30 minutes	03 August 2023
8	SI-RYP-8@牛城可可	Female	Online	45 minutes	13 August 2023

9	SI-RYP-9	Male	Online	57 minutes	28 August. 2023
10	SI-RYP-10	Female	Online	58 minutes	2 September 2023
11	SI-RYP-11	Female	Online	1 hours 5 minutes	20 September 2023
12	SI-RYP-12	Male	Online	46 minutes	30 September 2023
13	UI-RYP-13	Female	Online	30 minutes	13 November 2023
14	UI-RYP-14	Male	Online	35 minutes	13 December 2023
15	UI-MCI-15	Male	Online	45 minutes	13 February 2024

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