



**RURAL INFLUENCERS ON DOUYIN: REFLECTING
AND REINFORCING CIVIL AND MORAL VALUES**

BY

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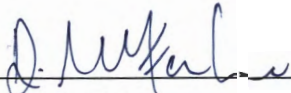
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ABSTRACT

This study explores the emergence of rural influencers on Douyin, a popular social media application in China, and investigates the values these influencers communicate to their audiences. Recognizing the instrumental role of media, particularly social media, in promoting societal values, it examines the values associated with rural life that Xi Jinping seeks to spread within Chinese society. The study then employs content analysis to examine the values projected by three prominent rural influencers—Northeast Yu Jie, 80 Xu Lao Lao, and Fu Ge San Nong. The findings show significant parallels between the values promoted by these influencers and those advocated by Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), emphasizing the role of digital platforms in aligning cultural dissemination with governmental objectives. Rural influencers not only showcase aspects of rural life but also reinforce the government's narrative on cultural preservation and moral education, thereby shaping public perceptions and promoting state-endorsed values in modern China.

Keywords: Douyin, rural influencers, cultural representation, Chinese rural values, digital media, content analysis

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Douyin is a short video-sharing application developed by Bytedance, which developed a spin-off for the global market called TikTok. Since its launch, Douyin has become a major media platform within China, with the capacity to reshape public discourse. Many prominent influencers have emerged on the platform, including influencers from rural communities. These rural influencers have garnered large followings and captured the public's imagination.

The author of this study began following the accounts of several well-known rural influencers and recognised that the values being projected were consistent with government statements regarding rural society and what the public should learn from rural society. Therefore, the author analyzed government speeches and public announcements about rural communities to understand what rural values the government seeks to cultivate in contemporary Chinese society. The study also followed the online activities of three major rural influencers on Douyin to understand what values they are projecting. The author focused on well-known influencers Northeast Yu Jie (n.d.), 80 Xu Lao Lao (n.d.), and Fu Ge San Nong (n.d.), who collectively represent a broad spectrum of rural life and values through their content on Douyin.

The study found that there is significant congruence between the values promoted by Chinese government policies and the values these rural influencers project through their Douyin accounts. By examining these influencers' engagement strategies and content themes, the study illuminates how rural influencers not only entertain but also serve as conduits for cultural and societal norms and values encouraged by governmental agendas.

1.1 What is Douyin?

Douyin was founded by ByteDance, a technology company established by Yiming Zhang and Rubo Liang. ByteDance was founded in 2012, initially focusing on developing applications that leveraged the burgeoning mobile internet sector. Their first

major project was Toutiao, a news aggregation app, launched in August 2012. Then recognizing the potential in the short video content space, they launched Douyin in September 2016 (Bytedance, n.d.).

Douyin is a mobile application designed for the creation and sharing of short, music-infused videos. Launched in the autumn of 2016, the app allows users to create videos lasting from 15 seconds to one minute (Lu & Lu, 2019). Originally focused on video sharing, Douyin has expanded its services to include e-commerce and live streaming, transforming the platform into a dynamic online marketplace. This new functionality allows influencers and brands to sell products directly to consumers through the app. Leveraging live streams and the strong fan bases of influencers, Douyin offers a novel shopping experience that capitalizes on the popularity of influencer marketing. This trend involves trusted influencers endorsing products to sway consumer decisions, a strategy that has grown significantly in influence and reach (Zhang, 2022; Liu, 2023).

Douyin and TikTok, both owned by ByteDance, are created to meet the distinct needs of their respective markets. Douyin is specifically designed for the Chinese audience, taking into account local cultural differences and its strict regulatory frameworks (Kaye et al., 2021). On the other hand, TikTok faces a global audience, adapting its features and content to suit a wide variety of cultural preferences across the world (Sun et al., 2020).

These platforms not only differ in their cultural and regulatory adaptation but also in how they engage their users. These differences are significant, reflecting varied patterns of media consumption that directly correlate with cultural distinctions (Yang, 2022). Such variations influence everything from the type of content that trends to how that content is interacted with by users. Given these distinctions, this study focuses exclusively on Douyin, aiming to delve deeper into its unique characteristics and its impact within the Chinese market.

1.2 Rise of Douyin in China

Douyin has impressively achieved a milestone of over 600 million daily active users by 2020 (Bytedance, 2020). TikTok's user base has also grown significantly, reaching 1.5 billion monthly active users by 2023, with projections suggesting an

increase to 1.8 billion by the end of 2024 (Iqbal, 2024). These statistics underline the strong market presence and leadership of both Douyin and TikTok in their respective markets across the globe.

According to research conducted by Zheng (2023), approximately 22% of Douyin's users were engaged with the platform for more than one hour each day as of April 2018. On average, users spend about 22 hours per month on Douyin, which translates to roughly 45 minutes daily. By 2021, the proportion of users spending more time on the platform had risen to 37.2%, indicating a significant increase in user engagement over time.

In response to concerns about excessive use, Douyin implemented several proactive measures in the second half of 2021 to promote responsible mobile phone usage. The platform introduced a variety of new features designed to encourage more mindful engagement with devices, thereby supporting healthier digital habits.

1.3 Rise of influencers in Douyin's ecosystem

Influencers have played a critical role in the development of Douyin.. Generally, a social media influencer is someone who has accumulated a large following by consistently posting content on specific topics, such as fashion, food, or travel. These influencers have the power to shape their followers' opinions and behaviors due to the trust and value placed in their content. On Douyin, influencers engage in creating and sharing short videos that cover a diverse range of activities including mobile videos cover numerous aspects of life, like beauty, cooking, cinema, education, health, and technology (Wang, 2020). Their content is designed to be creative and entertaining, which not only helps in attracting more followers but also opens doors for more advertising opportunities.

Influencers on Douyin also play a crucial role in the platform's live-streaming e-commerce environment. They are instrumental in promoting products, establishing trust, and fostering a sense of community among their viewers. This aspect of their role is particularly significant as it taps into the marketing potential of influencer-led sales, which is a growing trend in digital consumerism.

The impact of influencers on Douyin extends beyond content creation and community engagement. They significantly contribute to the platform's growth by boosting user engagement, enhancing trust, and stimulating purchase intentions. These activities attract more users and advertisers to the platform, fueling its expansion and success in the competitive social media landscape (Chen & Yang, 2023).

To attract and incentivize influencers, Douyin has established various mechanisms for influencers to generate income on the platform. Douyin increases visibility for new creators by managing exposure and distributing internet traffic. Influencers can utilize Dou+, a marketing tool on Douyin that enhances the visibility of their videos (Huang & Ye, 2024). This feature allows them to not only promote their own content but also enables fans to boost their favourite influencers' videos, thereby increasing visibility and exposure. This setup boosts the creators' potential for income by gaining more followers and effectively managing internet traffic. Influencers can explore which types of video content are most favored by audiences through the platform's Creator Center.

In the Creator Centre, influencers can identify and engage in platform-initiated tasks and challenges, which allows them to increase viewer interaction but earn monetary rewards. Once they have gained a certain level of attention, the platform will guide creators via the Star-Chart content trading system and set up a transaction chain that includes the platform, advertisers, and creators (Huang & Ye, 2024).

As influencers attract more followers, they can engage in live streaming to interact with a broader audience, further enhancing their earning opportunities on Douyin. These strategies enable influencers at different stages to optimize their income through the platform.

1.4 The Emergence of Rural Influencers

The spread of Douyin in different geographical areas of China tends to be concentrated in urban centers. Specifically, the user base is predominantly located in first- and second-tier cities, with the most significant users found in major metropolitan areas such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Shenzhen (Chen, 2023). This

distribution pattern indicates that Douyin's reach is most extensive in areas with higher population densities and greater access to technological infrastructure.

While Douyin users are concentrated in urban areas, there has been a growth in influencers based in rural communities. These influencers appeal to urban audiences who find the authenticity and simplicity refreshing compared to their everyday lives. Rural influencers on Douyin often highlight traditional lifestyles, providing city citizens a nostalgic escape from the complexities of modern urban life. This content resonates deeply with viewers, offering them a break from the often less authentic, high-paced urban lifestyle (Xinhua News Agency, 2021).

This research focuses on three rural influencers on Douyin whose follower counts range from 1 million to 1.5 million. The selected influencers are Northeast Yujie, 80 Xulaolao, and Fuge San Nong. This study observed content on these accounts over six months.

The influencers were chosen because they are representative of the broader range of rural influencers on the platform. Each influencer brings a unique perspective due to their varied backgrounds and follower demographics. Northeast Yujie (n.d.), with the largest follower base, offers insights into the content preferences of a massive audience. 80 Xulaolao (n.d.), with a medium-sized follower base, and Fuge San Nong (n.d.), with the smallest, provide a comparative look at how different audience sizes produce different content.

1.5 Douyin and the Government's 'Internet+' Policy

The growth of Douyin has occurred while the Chinese government has been implementing various policies to promote digital technologies in all aspects of life in China. The Chinese government has strategically deployed the "Internet+" policy to propel the integration of Internet technologies with traditional economic sectors. Launched in 2015, the policy is designed to "deeply integrate the innovative achievements of the internet with various sectors of the economy and society, promoting technological advancement, efficiency enhancement, and organizational transformation" (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015). This integration aims to boost the innovation capacity and productivity of the real economy, crafting a broader

economic and social development model grounded in internet infrastructure and innovation elements.

The "Internet+" initiative is pivotal in fostering new economic models and is recognized as an essential force in economic and social innovation and development. It is articulated to reshape the innovation system, stimulate innovation vitality, and nurture emerging industries and innovative public service models. This aligns closely with the study's focus on how rural influencers on platforms like Douyin are not merely content creators but are significant in disseminating government-endorsed social and economic values. Their activities on these digital platforms exemplify the practical application of "Internet+" in promoting rural socio-economic development through digital engagement (The State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

While Douyin does not have a policy that directly corresponds to "Internet+", the platform aligns with this national strategy by ensuring its operations support effective policy implementation. Douyin leverages its influence by promoting content from rural influencers and enhancing their visibility through sophisticated AI algorithms. This approach not only diversifies the content on the platform but also supports the government's objectives under the "Internet+" initiative. Moreover, Douyin actively participates in the digital economy by promoting online sales of agricultural products, notably through its "618 campaign." (Sayers, 2022) This initiative helps open new economic channels and foster innovation in the rural economy, aligning with the broader goals of the "Internet+" policy.

The Chinese government believes that such policies can significantly aid rural areas by providing new opportunities for growth and development. The effectiveness of the government's directives, combined with the high rate of implementation across the country, underpins the potential success of these initiatives in supporting rural communities. This strategic approach aims to harness the power of the internet to drive socio-economic development across all regions of China.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1 Literature review

Central to this study is a comprehensive literature review covering a range of literature. It begins with an exploration of the literature on Douyin, and then focuses on scholarship focused on the role of Douyin in public discourse. Literature on government internet policies and the power to shape public discourse and values the media is also considered. Finally, literature that focuses on rural influences is considered.

Much of the literature on Douyin adopts a marketing perspective and tries to understand the appeal of Douyin, customer engagement on the platform and how influencers effectively engage with consumers. Chen and Zhang (2021) focus on the marketing success of Douyin, highlighting the platform's appeal to a largely female audience. They discuss the tailored content that resonates well with its users, offering insights into why certain content, like that from rural influencers, can become popular. The scholar Duan (2022) investigates the communication and marketing strategies employed by Wen Genie, a prominent Douyin influencer. Their study identifies authenticity and skill teaching as key strategies, along with the utilization of trending internet events.

Other scholars have focused on the role of the Douyin in public discourses. In their analysis of Douyin's role in national storytelling, Fung and Hu (2022) explore how the platform facilitates the sharing of videos that encapsulate national narratives. Research by Dongke, Sannusi, and Mustaffa (2022) examines how major media outlets like People's Daily and China Daily use Douyin to report significant events, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

Some literature considers the relationship between Douyin and national policies regarding the internet. In 2015, China launched the "Internet +" policy and the "Mass Entrepreneurship and Innovation" initiative, which transformed digital entrepreneurship in the countryside. This led rural residents to expand their reach to urban and even global audiences, helping with economic and cultural growth. Lu et al. (2022) discusses the application of "Internet+" strategies in marketing rural homestay tourism

products. They highlight how the integration of internet technologies can improve the visibility and appeal of rural areas, which is particularly relevant for influencers who aim to showcase rural life on platforms like Douyin.

Platforms like Kuaishou and Douyin, which display rural lifestyles, support the government's goals of modernizing old industries and keeping social order. Research by Lin and de Kloe (2019) shows how these online spaces make it easier for anyone to create content. This opens up new opportunities for grassroots creativity and business. They use Kuaishou as a case to show how these government actions help more than just the economy. Rural people use these digital tools to make money, share their culture, and build their communities.

In this study, the author reviews the literature on the significant role media plays in shaping social norms and values. Specifically, Arias (2019) explores how television soap operas can change individual beliefs and help form societal consensus. This research details how media influences social norms by broadcasting content that reflects widely recognized and accepted aspects within a community. In Addition, Media representation often exhibits significant biases, particularly in the portrayal of races and ethnicities. For example, Latinos are frequently either underrepresented or negatively stereotyped, which perpetuates certain societal perceptions and attitudes toward these groups (Dixon et al., 2019).

The author has explored these dynamics within the Chinese context by considering how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) strategically uses media and education to garner public support and shape the public discourse. Research shows that the Chinese state employs tactics of content control and disinformation to sustain its preferred narratives globally. This includes the use of propaganda and strategic censorship, which are integral to China's efforts to manage its national and international image (Cook, 2021). These perspectives illustrate how the media can be a powerful tool for shaping cultural values and social norms, both within a country and internationally. The literature also highlights how China aims to expand its global media influence by enhancing its international presence. This includes initiatives like launching multilingual channels and employing foreign reporters to improve China's global image (lishi, 2013). This approach is part of a broader strategy to enhance China's soft power on the international stage.

Literature suggests that Douyin plays a significant role in shaping the public, especially youth, national pride, and cultural identities. There are studies exploring the phenomenon of "playful patriotism," showing how positive nationalist messages are integrated into entertaining content (Chen et al., 2021). The strategic construction of this content significantly impacts the formation of public perceptions and national identity.

Some literature considers Douyin within the context of the rural life. Ma (2023) investigates the intersections of agriculture, media, and labor, and explores the implications of this change for their individual identities and community interaction and function. Chen et al. (2021) discusses how the rise of rural influencers on platforms like Kuaishou has democratized the media landscape, enabling individuals from diverse backgrounds, particularly from rural areas, to share their lives and stories. According to their study, this shift allows rural creators to shape and reinforce their self-identities through content that incorporates elements of geography, consumer culture, and personal identity. The research indicates that these videos do more than just display the daily life and traditions of rural communities, they also delve into the symbolic meanings of these portrayals, influencing both the self-perception of rural creators and how they are viewed by others.

Moreover, Zhang (2020) explores how rural content on new media platforms challenges traditional views of rural vulnerability and urban-rural inequality. The study reveals that many rural influencers, often former migrant workers returning to their rural origins, use these platforms to present a nuanced view of rural life. This content blurs the lines between urban and rural identities, resonating with both rural and urban audiences. This study also highlights how these influencers navigate the complexities of their identities, showcasing lives that are authentically rural yet influenced by urban experiences.

At the same time, the portrayal of rural life on digital platforms particularly through live streaming raises questions about authenticity. Zhao (2024) discusses how live streams turn rural life into a product aimed at urban audiences. This trend can oversimplify and romanticize the countryside, sometimes giving their audience a misunderstood picture of rural life and rural identity.

2.2 Research problem and questions

The literature review highlights the significant role of digital platforms like Douyin in China's rural socio-economic development. While research often focuses on the use of digital technologies in urban areas, the distinctive role of rural influencers on these platforms is less explored. These influencers are key in presenting both traditional and contemporary values, serving as a bridge between rural and urban perspectives and supporting government initiatives. The literature also indicates the power of media to shape public discourse. Therefore, it is worth examining not only the role of Douyin in prompting rural economies, but also the role of Douyin influencers in shaping social and cultural values.

Research generally recognizes the importance of digital platforms in enhancing visibility for rural communities but seldom explores in depth how rural influencers on Douyin align their content with the values that the Chinese leadership seeks to promote in the broader population. To date, there is absence of research on the relationship between the values political leadership seeks to promote and the values rural influencers propagate through content depicting rural life.

To address this gap in the literature, the author asks:

What values associated with Chinese rural life does the current leadership of China seek to instill within the broader population, and to what extent are these values projected by Douyin rural influencers in their videos?

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Methodology

To answer these questions the author adopted content analysis as the primary research method. Krippendorff (2018) defined content analysis as a systematic and objective approach to quantifying and interpreting media content, revealing patterns, themes, or trends. This research methodology is particularly relevant in social media. Another study uses content analysis to look at the emotions shown in pictures of South Korean politicians' faces (Ozel & Park, 2012). The research sorts these facial expressions and checks how they relate to how visible these politicians are online and how people interact with them.

This study applies content analysis to explore how Douyin portrays rural life in China. It examines three rural influencers: Northeast Yu Jie, 80 Xu Lao Lao, and Fu Ge San Nong. The study looks for patterns and distinct approaches these influencers use to depict rural life and how they connect with their audience. It also assesses how 'likes' influence content changes over time. All data for this study is current as of November 2023, focusing on numbers of followers, videos, and 'likes.' Since social media is ever-changing, these figures might shift. The analysis is based only on the data from this time.

The study chose these three influencer accounts because they show different aspects of rural life, interact differently with their audiences, and have varying numbers of followers. This choice helps give a broad view of rural China on Douyin. The goal is to understand how content evolves with audience growth and the overall impact of Douyin on rural storytelling and cultural sharing.

3.2 Findings

The findings are discussed in two parts. Firstly, the perspective of the Chinese Communist Party and Xi Jinping is discussed regarding rural society and values. Secondly, the findings of the analysis of the three influencer accounts are discussed.

3.2.1 The CCP and rural society

The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) aims to instil values for a prosperous and harmonious society, such as hard work, entrepreneurship, dedication, creativity, and thriftiness, promoting new trends and customs suitable for modern times. In his speech to the 20th National Congress, Xi Jinping emphasized the Chinese government's commitment to instilling traditional Chinese values to bolster civic morality and societal harmony. He articulated the continuation of civic morality campaigns and the promotion of traditional Chinese virtues, focusing on strengthening family ties and enhancing the moral standards of minors. The speech highlights initiatives aimed at "carrying forward traditional Chinese virtues, fostering stronger family ties, values, and traditions, and raising the intellectual and moral standards of minors" (Xi, 2022). Xi emphasized the need to "promote cultural and ethical progress by coordinating actions to raise awareness, apply principles, and develop initiatives across both urban and rural areas," fostering a culture of hard work, enterprise, dedication, creativity, and thriftiness throughout society (Xi, 2022).

Addressing the youth, Xi directly appealed to them to align closely with the Party's ideals, encouraging them to "steadfastly follow the Party's commands, aim high but remain grounded, and dare to think and act boldly" (Xi, 2022). This guidance aims to inspire young individuals to actively contribute to building a modern socialist country, embodying ideals, responsibility, perseverance, and a spirit of dedication.

Xi also addressed concerns about online behavior, noting that "misguided patterns of thinking such as money worship, hedonism, egocentricity, and historical nihilism were common, and online discourse was rife with disorder." He highlighted the importance of fostering a more constructive and values-based public discourse to counteract these negative influences. (Xi, 2022)

It is evident that the CCP recognises the importance of the Internet in the cultural life of the Chinese. The Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council announced in 2023 the plan for the construction of Digital China that supports the development of a robust Internet culture, with a focus on increasing the availability of high-quality cultural products online. As part of this plan, the directive is

to "Vigorously develop Internet culture, strengthen the supply of high-quality Internet cultural products, and guide various platforms and netizens to create and produce Internet cultural products that are positive, healthy, and good-spirited" (Xinhua News Agency, 2023). This approach aims to encourage the creation of uplifting and constructive content across various online platforms.

Xi Jinping has consistently emphasized the cultural and historical significance of Chinese villages as the mainstay of Chinese civilization. During his inspections of traditional villages, he highlighted that these communities are not merely residential spaces but pivotal bearers of Chinese cultural heritage (Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

Xi Jinping also voiced his aspirations for these villages. He urges residents to conserve their natural environment while blending traditional characteristics with modern advancements. By doing this, villagers can preserve the unique aesthetic of Chinese culture and enhance the beauty of the rural landscape (Xinhua News Agency, 2023). These villages, with their historical architecture, including Huizhou-style mansions and ancient texts on familial ethics, encapsulate the essence of the Chinese civilization. From the vast Yangtze River to the vibrant ceramic culture and ancient villages, each element of China's rural heritage carries the enduring legacy of its civilization, reflecting its values and philosophies in various forms (Xinhua News Agency, 2023).

Xi Jinping has a long history of engagement with rural communities and spent seven years during his youth in Liangjiahe. This period is often referred to as his 'university' where he embraced China's traditional virtues. A recent article from Xinhua News Agency (2024) details his immersive experience in the village, highlighting the significant impact it had on his approach to leadership and governance. The article noted that during this time, Xi engaged fully in the daily life of the villagers, sharing their work and meals. It points out that Xi vividly remembers the villagers' generosity in sharing their limited resources and knowledge, which helped forge his commitment to the principles of 'Ren Yi' — benevolence and righteousness. Thround and were reflected in Xi's mutually beneficial actions, such as sharing his food with those in need and providing educational materials to those eager to learn. (Xinhua News Agency, 2024).

Xi Jinping stresses the importance of traditional Chinese values to build a society that values morality and harmony. He talks about the need for hard work, entrepreneurship, dedication, creativity, and thriftiness. These values should be shared by everyone, including both urban and rural areas. Xi particularly highlights the importance of youth in embodying these values, encouraging them to closely align with the Party's ideals and actively contribute to national development.

Xi points out problems with modern online behaviour, such as the focus on material wealth and self-interest, which go against traditional values. To counteract these negative trends, Xi promotes the creation and sharing of high-quality cultural content online that encourages positive and healthy attitudes.

Through his inspections and personal experiences in traditional villages, Xi highlights the cultural and historical importance of rural areas as keepers of Chinese heritage. He advocates for blending traditional practices with modern improvements to preserve and enhance China's rich cultural history. These efforts by Xi aim to create a culturally rich and morally sound society, deeply rooted in traditional values and adapted to modern times.

3.2.2 Douyin Influencer Analysis

In the following section, the content of Douyin rural influencers is discussed. Particular consideration is given to the values and societal norms that are projected through the videos of the rural influencers. It is found that the values are consistent with values that Xi found among the people in Liangjiahe and that he hopes would be adopted by people, particularly the youth throughout the country.

3.2.2.1 Northeast Yu Jie (东北雨姐)

The first rural Douyin influencer observed is "Northeast Yu Jie" (n.d.). From rural Northeast China, she has become a standout figure on the platform. She brings the lively culture of her region to over 13.3 million followers through her 191 videos. Her content is a window into the true essence of rural Chinese life, showcasing daily routines and community ties as well as the deep cultural heritage of the Northeast. She connects urban audiences to the countryside, giving them an authentic look at rural traditions and festivities, and narrowing the divide between urban and rural perspectives.

"Northeast Yu Jie" in the early phase attracted her audience with videos that received less than 300,000 likes, focusing on simple cooking and household tasks, providing a straightforward presentation of rural Northeast China. As her following grew, the content evolved during the development phase with 300,000 to 900,000 likes, the content broadening to include traditional practices, local festivals, and community events, enriching the cultural narrative with a structured storyline. In the mature phase, achieving over 1,000,000 likes per video, the content further deepened in quality and cultural exploration, showcasing close family relationships and strong community bonds, which resonate deeply with audiences.

In the mature stage of her video content, "Northeast Yu Jie" has established a consistent narrative structure. Each video typically begins with a dynamic opening where "Yu Jie" energetically opens a door, setting the stage for the day's activities. She then engages in basic rural tasks such as working the land or tending to animals, which underscores her connection to the rural lifestyle.

As the video progresses, "Yu Jie" shifts to domestic activities like cooking, during which family members and sometimes neighbors make appearances. These interactions not only add depth to the content but also highlight the distinct, often contrasting, personalities within her household, especially between "Yu Jie" and her husband. This contrast adds an element of relatability and humor, enriching the narrative.

The key characteristic of each video is a cheerful family gathering where everyone comes together for a meal, celebrating the fruits of their labor in a display of unity and joy. This recurring ending paints a vivid picture of traditional Chinese familial bonds, emphasizing values of self-sufficiency, positivity, diligence, and courage. Through this pattern, "Yu Jie" effectively portrays a healthy and aspirational view of rural life that appeals to her audience's longing for community and rootedness.

Her videos feature distinctive and characteristic background music. This "conditioning" soundtrack ensures that even if viewers haven't watched her videos, they will immediately associate the music with her account. The videos also use rapid camera switches, averaging 1.5 seconds per scene, and contrasting character movements, especially at the beginning of the video. These elements quickly capture the audience's attention and keep them engaged for a longer period.

Also, both the shooting and editing of this account have been professionally improved compared to the simple and direct presentation method of earlier videos. The professionalism of the video production contrasts with the modest environment and background of Yu Jie. The productions suggest significant financial investment and the role of a team in the video production.

3.2.2.2 80 Xu Lao Lao (八零徐姥姥)

The second rural influencer observed is '80 Xu Lao Lao' (n.d.) who has 6.09 million followers. This influencer brings to life the warm experiences of a three-generation family in rural Northeastern China. The main creator is the grandson, who left the city to return to his rural beginnings. His content shows the contrast between urban and rural life. Videos capture precious family moments, focusing on traditional country living and cooking. This account offers a view of local customs and the strong bonds of family especially family connections across generations and might resonate with viewers who feel a sense of nostalgia for such family life.

In its beginning phase, the account had less than 100,000 likes. 80 Xu Lao Lao explored various aspects of rural life through videos that depicted authentic and heartfelt interactions between a grandmother and her grandson. As the account gained popularity and entered the development phase, the likes per video ranged between 100,000 and 500,000. The content shifted to focus to deeper family emotions, moving away from 'tough love' to demonstrate an affectionate and humorous characteristic of their relationship. In the mature phase, reaching over 500,000 likes, the videos shot and presented in a very simple and everyday way, not only show the grandmother's impressive cooking methods but also some interesting parts of their life.

The account 80 Xu Lao Lao has established a stable content theme. The filming style is straightforward and unpolished, mirroring very normal daily life, which enhances the authenticity of their rural lifestyle. The grandson's recurring opening quote "Let me show you how good my grandma's cooking is" has become a signature of the account. This recurring phrase has become a key memory point and sets the tone for a whole video model that blends tradition, and family bonds. 80 Xu Lao Lao's videos typically end with in a joyful family meal, celebrating their labour's fruits with lively and loud dining scenes. Loud eating signifies the deliciousness of the food

and the happiness of this shared inter-generational family experience. The videos not only showcase the skills of the grandmother but also reinforce traditional Chinese values such as strong family bonds, positivity, and unity, depicted through the family's collective enjoyment of a well-prepared meal.

3.2.2.3 Fu Ge San Nong (福哥三农)

The third rural influencer observed is Fu Ge San Nong (n.d.). The account of Fu Ge San Nong showcases the food and handcraft traditions of Fujian province in Southern China to 1.54 million followers. Through its 204 videos, the account provides a window into traditional crafts and farming practices. It features daily activities like soup-making and handcraft production. It presents various traditional skills of the older generation. This account's content highlights a lifestyle of self-reliance, with a focus on using natural materials like local herbs, bamboo, and produce from the mountainous landscape. It draws urban viewers into a world where life's necessities come directly from the land, providing a sustained way of life that's quite rare in the urban context.

Different from the other two accounts, "Fu Ge San Nong" started strong, with more than 50,000 likes per video in the early stage. It attracted urban audiences with its unique presentation of traditional handicrafts and cooking with local ingredients and provided a new way to showcase rural life. perspective. However, during its development phase, the account's popularity did not rise steadily. Instead, each video only received between 10,000 and 50,000 likes. In order to change this trend, "Fu Ge San Nong" tried to broaden its appeal by providing a deeper understanding of traditional crafts and daily cooking methods and began to focus more on soup making.

Despite these efforts, the account struggled to establish a consistent, engaging, and memorable format. In the mature stage, the account stabilized, attracting only about 10,000 loyal fans to like it, and the video content has become more standardized. Although the video content did not achieve ideal results, the video still emphasized the naturalness and interest of local materials, showing the process from forest, land to table. This narrative emphasizes not only the sustainability of rural practices but also a sense of freshness that is different from urban life.

As the account transitioned into its mature phase, it retained a deep connection to these nature themes but settled into a more consistent and relaxed format. The current video narrative structure all starts with a voice-over narrating the making of traditional soups or handicrafts and explaining the origins of the products or ingredients, which often include medicinal herbs. This is followed by scenes of gathering materials or ingredients, woven together with serene views of the surrounding nature. The pace of these videos is deliberately slow. The videos are complemented with the soothing sounds of traditional Chinese musical instruments, which creates a tranquil atmosphere. Although this methodical approach may not capture attention as quickly as faster-paced videos, it offers viewers an easygoing and immersive experience, enhancing their appreciation for the simplicity and beauty of rural living.

The Fu Ge San Nong account highlights the health benefits and deliciousness of traditional soups made with medicinal herbs and unique ingredients. These recipes, while distinctive, are presented in a way that makes them easy to replicate. The account transports urban viewers to a serene, slow-paced environment, showcasing lush natural landscapes that offer a peaceful retreat from bustling city life. Although it lacks the aggressive marketing punch that characterizes many conditioning videos, the setting does succeed in creating a relaxing atmosphere. Within the account's video, the spirit of "doing it yourself to make everything", self-sufficiency, hard work, patience, and hard work are explicitly and implicitly expressed.

3.2.3 Rural Influencer Income

The income streams of Northeast Yu Jie, 80 Xulaolao, and Fu Ge San Nong demonstrate diverse approaches to monetization on the Douyin platform. The core revenue for each influencer comes from video plays and follower interactions, where increased views and likes enhance monetization through traffic-based revenue methods. This encompasses earnings from in-video advertisements and strategically placed advertisement links in video comments, which boost visibility and interaction rates.

In addition to advertisement revenue, Northeast Yu Jie and 80 Xulaolao engage in live-streaming sessions to promote and directly sell products, a method not yet adopted by Fu Ge San Nong. Their personal homepage serves as platforms for ongoing product promotions and features affiliate links that generate sales

commissions. The selection of products often reflects the personal or regional brand of the influencer. For example, Northeast Yu Jie capitalizes on her regional identity to sell products like Northeast rice, pickled cabbage, and soybean oil, catering to a niche market interested in these regional specialties.

80 Xulaolao offers their audience a mix of agricultural and urban products, such as sweet potatoes, millet, juicers, and durian cakes, indicating a strategy that appeals to both rural and urban followers. This diverse product range suggests a broader market reach. In contrast, Fu Ge San Nong focuses on natural products like black bean vinegar and dried bamboo shoots and has yet to integrate live streaming into its monetization strategy, which may affect its overall visibility and sales compared to the other two accounts.

3.2.4 Overview of rural influencer engagement strategies

The analysis of the three Douyin accounts “Northeast Yu Jie, 80 Xu Lao Lao, and Fu Ge San Nong” provides insights into the diverse strategies used to attract and engage different audiences on social media. Each account employs distinct approaches to video production and content focus, resonating with unique viewer groups.

Northeast Yu Jie's videos use professional filming and editing techniques that have helped establish a strong brand identity. This account is characterized by its memorable use of background music that becomes a signature element, so recognizable that even those who have not watched her videos associate the music with her account. This strategic use of audiovisual elements helps instill the account in viewers' memories, leveraging media strategies that emphasize the repetition of key themes to boost recall and engagement.

Conversely, 80 Xu Lao Lao and Fu Ge San Nong take a more straightforward, less polished video style that highlights the authenticity and simplicity of rural life. Their content appeals to viewers seeking respite from urban confusion, providing insights into traditional living and cultural practices that raise nostalgia and a desiring for a simpler existence. The calm and natural settings featured offer a soothing escape from daily urban routines, marking a distinct appeal to urban viewers desiring for peaceful and relaxation.

These differing approaches highlight the broad range of content strategies on social media, from high-quality production to authentic portrayals of daily life. Each style has its advantages, appealing to different audience preferences. Northeast Yu Jie attracts those who appreciate slick production values, while 80 Xu Lao Lao and Fu Ge San Nong draw in those who value a more natural and unfiltered view of rural life.

In summary, each Douyin account has its unique charm. Some of them offer high-quality content while others are known for their authenticity. The content created by these influencers is entertaining and educational. They reflect the core values of today's Chinese society, and also their videos are relaxing, which helps maintain cultural continuity.



CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 Conclusion

The emergence of the digital economy and platforms like Douyin marks a major change in the economy and the media landscape. Douyin has emerged as a significant tool for shaping public discourse and cultural values. This research has focused on Douyin's role within China's digital economy, identifying it as a significant platform for potentially influencing the culture and values of the Chinese populace. Literature on media highlights the power of such platforms to shape public opinion and values, noting that media can be utilized to influence both local and international perceptions.

Through detailed analysis of government speeches, public announcements, and the activities of three major rural influencers on Douyin, this study has highlighted a substantial alignment between the values promoted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and those communicated through rural influencers' content. The leader of China Xi Jinping has a strong affiliation with traditional rural life. Through his speeches, it is evident that he hopes that values of Chinese rural communities can be adopted by the country's citizens. Xi Jinping has also noted that online discourse has been fraught with misinformation and digital development plans highlight the need to develop digital cultural products to guide the country's citizens. This study suggests that rural influencers on Douyin are producing such digital cultural products that project the values consistent with Xi Jinping's thought. These influencers share and represent values that align with government objectives, such as promoting traditional virtues, enhancing civic morality, and strengthening community ties. They also demonstrate core Chinese traditional values like diligence, family unity, and community harmony, which are heavily emphasized under Xi Jinping's leadership.

This alignment suggests that Douyin serves as more than just an entertainment platform. It plays a pivotal role in the dissemination of civic and moral values among its audience. This capability highlights the platform's potential to reinforce

efforts aimed at instilling values essential for societal harmony and the intellectual and moral development of the youth.

In conclusion, Douyin and its rural influencers act as modern vectors for traditional values, effectively bridging the gap between old customs and the new media landscape. This study offers a unique perspective on how digital platforms like Douyin can complement government efforts to cultivate a culturally rich and values-aligned society. The findings advocate for recognizing the strategic value of digital media in supporting broader governmental and societal objectives, highlighting the potential of platforms like Douyin in shaping a culturally and morally informed citizenry.

4.2 Limitation and Future Study

A limitation of this study is its focus on only three rural influencers on Douyin, which may not adequately represent the diversity of rural content creators across different regions of China. This limited scope restricts the generalizability of the findings, as influencers from other geographic and demographic backgrounds might offer different perspectives or emphasize different aspects of rural life and values. Therefore, future research should seek to validate the findings in this study by considering a wider range of rural influencer accounts.

The study's methodology centres on content analysis without direct interaction like interviews with the influencers or their audiences. Future research could include interviews with influencers to understand their choice of content and studies among the audience to gauge their interpretation of the video's content and the impact on their perception of values.

It is also crucial to explore the monetization strategies employed by rural influencers, particularly focusing on live streaming and direct sales through the platform. Analyzing the relationship between these monetization efforts and engagement metrics such as likes, views, and comments will allow future studies to assess how money motivations influence content strategies and authenticity. This exploration will help understand the balance rural influencers must maintain between generating income and preserving the authenticity that appeals to their audiences.

Moreover, investigating how these monetization activities in line with or challenge traditional cultural expressions and governmental goals will provide valuable perspectives on the interplay between digital media, money motivations, and cultural preservation in rural China. Such research could understand of the digital culture economy and its relationship with government policy on the development and sustainability of rural communities. These areas of future research will not only fill the gaps identified in this study but also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamic landscape of digital influence and rural transformation in modern China.



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