

Chinese Pastoral

by Pu Yan

The real story of online video isn't in China's booming megacities, but in its rural villages.

Open the app. Watch a fifteen-second video. Double tap for more videos. Watch those. Tap. Make a fifteen-second video. Touch it up. Post it. More than 500 million monthly active users of TikTok perform this cycle countless times a day, as they create and share short videos on one of the world's most popular social media platforms.

TikTok, also known as Douyin (抖音) in China, is a social video app made by the Chinese company Bytedance. Since its release in 2016, it has become phenomenally successful. By the spring of 2018 it had become the most popular iOS app worldwide, with more than 45 million downloads over the first quarter of 2018 in the App Store, surpassing Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. And in late 2018, after a \$3 billion funding round led by SoftBank boosted its valuation to \$75 billion, Bytedance became the world's biggest privately held startup.

Yet as TikTok continues to grow globally, boasting more users around the world than Twitter or Snapchat, its biggest impact back home in China is where you might least expect it: the countryside. The real story of TikTok and platforms like it isn't in the booming megacities, but in the rural villages. The consequences for the future of Chinese society, and the future of Chinese tech, are immense.

Country Living

Platforms like TikTok have played a central role in bringing inexperienced users from rural communities online. Perhaps the most important reason is the fact that they use video rather than text. Compared to text, video content is much easier to comprehend for rural users, who are likely to have lower literacy rates, less formal education, and less experience with the internet.

As part of my fieldwork, I interviewed a middle-aged female internet user in rural China who has only received a primary-school-level education. She prefers to watch cooking tutorial videos instead of reading descriptions of recipes, both because video tutorials are more convenient to follow while cooking and because she finds watching video easier than reading.

For many rural users, in fact, online video has lowered the education and literacy barriers that had previously prevented them from participating in typical internet activities, such as reading news articles. They can now watch news videos, often clips from local TV news broadcasts that are shared on social media. They can also join the lively conversations that spring up around these videos, as users from the same rural community interact with one another in the comments section.

Shun, sixty years old, used to work as the secretary of the Communist Party branch committee of a village in Henan Province. He only recently became an active user of WeChat, a popular messaging and social-media app, after it began to offer more video content. Due to his lack of formal education, Shun says that he finds “watching short videos on the news posted by young people a more efficient way of information-seeking than reading long articles.” He belongs to a WeChat group chat for members of his village and, having silently followed the conversation for more than a year, he now shares videos that he finds informative with young villagers, hoping to connect with the new generation.

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Online video also offers an essential source of information for acquiring new skills, especially for female villagers who are learning how to knit, dance, and cook. Feng, a forty-three-year-old housewife, has become the center of her social circle in her village by introducing group dancing techniques to her girlfriends. Feng has fewer than three years of formal schooling, but she followed tutorial videos on a popular mobile app called “Tangdou Group Dancing App.”

Feng discovered these videos because of a recommendation algorithm. Video apps implement sophisticated tools to tailor

personalized content for their users, and this is often how inexperienced internet users in rural China find content. The algorithm-driven recommendation systems are frequently mentioned by interviewees in my fieldwork in Henan Province, a less developed area in the central part of the country. They consider recommendations an easier and more intuitive way to discover new videos than search engines such as Baidu, which require some experience to know how to use effectively.

Content Creators

Rural users aren't just consuming video, however. They are also *creating* it.

To help users make videos, apps like TikTok have embedded tools such as stickers, filters, transitions effects, and background music. These tools enable users with no special training to make well-produced videos relatively quickly. The videos have to be short: just like Twitter, where users are required to convey messages concisely in less than 280 characters, apps like TikTok only allow short videos — on TikTok, the limit is fifteen seconds — so users are encouraged to focus on the most attention-catching moments.

A vast online ecosystem of rural video has emerged as a result, as users document their everyday lives. They make videos about how they farm crops, raise animals, and participate in the social life of the village. Such content is widely popular among rural users, who get to see their own communities represented by actual members of those communities. Rural users are adapting the platforms to their own ends, telling their own story rather than having official media outlets tell their story for them. As one TikTok user in rural China told me, “Videos generated at a grassroots level and produced by ordinary rural users represent

a more vivid picture of what everyday life is like in rural China.” These videos are also popular among rural users who must leave the countryside for work: they help migrant workers feel connected to their hometowns when working in the cities, offering daily entertainment that does not require too much of a time commitment.

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But rural users aren't the only consumers of these videos. The platforms also enable *urban* users to see rural life in far more depth and detail — and in the process are helping to bridge the significant divide between the two worlds. This divide has grown dramatically since the country began opening up in the 1970s. Industrialization, urbanization, and modernization have pushed rural and urban China in two very different directions, primarily due to economic policies of the central government that favor urban areas and the unequal distribution of infrastructure and wealth that has resulted.

Moreover, while migrant workers from rural China have fueled economic growth in urban areas, the rigid *hukou* (“household registration”) system prevents them from becoming urban citizens and enjoying social benefits such as better pension funds, better healthcare, and better schools for their children. In recent years, many young migrants have returned to their towns

and villages. They have brought the basic technology skills they learned in the cities back with them, and often put them to use in an entrepreneurial capacity: for instance, by starting businesses and then reaching urban customers with e-commerce websites, mobile social media, and short-video platforms. This has produced even more online encounters across the rural-urban divide.

Sometimes, however, such encounters have led to controversy. In 2016, just as short-video platforms were starting to appear, a public account on WeChat named “Doctor X” wrote a post criticizing rural users for the “vulgarity” of their videos. The author argued that rural users were seeking attention by showing particularly impoverished households or by performing dangerous stunts like eating glass or raw meat. If their content became popular, the users could then cash in by promoting ads or receiving gifts from fans. The videos reflected poorly on Chinese rural life, the author warned, and underscored the unbridgeable gap between the countryside and the cities.

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Similarly, the official news has criticized short-video platforms for not designing “socially accountable algorithms,” and has called for them to take responsibility for feeding higher-quality content to users. In January 2019, the China Netcasting Services Association, a national industry body, published a set of guidelines on short-video platforms, which forbid the publication of one hundred topics that are politically sensitive or considered

“immoral” or “unhealthy.” It also required platforms to review content *before* it goes live, which would require hiring more moderators. Companies like Bytedance already employ thousands of moderators to review the content on their platforms, ensuring it remains within acceptable parameters. But the China Netcasting Services Association wants them to do more: “In theory, the number of reviewers should be above one thousandth of the number of videos published on the platform per day.”

Yet for all the controversy around short-video platforms, there is ample evidence that they also create opportunities for mutual understanding and exchange across the urban-rural divide. For example, the Huanong Brothers are two young men from the countryside who have become some of the most popular social-media influencers in China in 2018. After working in urban areas for a few years, they returned to their village and started a small business raising and selling bamboo rats, a type of rodent that’s used in local dishes in Jiangxi Province. They document their everyday life of raising, cleaning, and cooking bamboo rats on Xigua Video, a platform also owned by Bytedance that allows longer videos than TikTok. The Huanong Brothers’ videos have gone viral on the Chinese internet, earning over 500 million views and 2 million followers. Their online success has also translated into offline income: in addition to earning advertising revenue on their videos, the Huanong Brothers have sold an increasing number of pre-orders for their bamboo rats.

As more urban and rural users use these platforms, and the number of videos from both sides increases exponentially, the two societies within China are getting to know one another’s way of life. The platforms can even provide an income stream to rural users, as demonstrated by the Huanong Brothers and by e-commerce entrepreneurs who use videos to promote the sale

of agricultural products to urban areas. And while urban and rural audiences still have different preferences when it comes to content, rural videos can become popular among urban users nostalgic for what they perceive to be a simpler life closer to the natural environment. Online video platforms offer a site of encounter where two very different Chinas can meet.

Going Global

As the Chinese tech industry grows, its companies are increasingly looking beyond the domestic market to the international one. Here, Chinese video platforms have been uniquely successful. Apps like TikTok are also finding a large audience throughout the world.

According to *The Verge*, “Bytedance is the first Chinese internet company with a significant, genuinely engaged following around the world.” It has opened offices in several countries, including Japan, Brazil, India, and the United States. It is also hiring speakers of more than a dozen languages, including Portuguese, Polish, Malay, and Arabic. Its American growth has been particularly intense: in the US, the iOS app has been downloaded and installed almost 80 million times. In October 2018, it was downloaded more than Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube. Meanwhile, TikTok’s smaller rival Kwai, known as Kuaishou in China, is also gaining ground overseas. In the spring of 2018, it ranked as the most downloaded iOS app in the Philippines and Indonesia, and the most downloaded mobile app in Vietnam and South Korea.

As Chinese video platforms become more global, Chinese users are encountering more overseas content generated by international users. Similarly, international users are encountering more Chinese content by virtue of using Chinese platforms. It

remains to be seen whether these platforms can bridge not only the rural-urban gap within China, but the divides between China and the rest of the world. The linguistic and cultural barriers are certainly higher, but the financial rewards are far greater. Bringing the Chinese countryside and the cities closer together may end up being a rehearsal for a far more ambitious act of ambassadorship. ~~~~

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