

## From Disenchantment to Reenchantment: Rural Microcelebrities, Short Video, and the Spectacle-ization of the Rural Lifescape on Chinese Social Media

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Facilitated by the explosive growth in mobile devices and social media, the rise of rural China's microcelebrities and the accompanying short videos of the country's rural lifescape disseminated through various social media platforms have generated astonishing viewership figures and taken Chinese netizens by storm. These digital productions, despite a wide range of filming techniques and production quality, employ sophisticated narrative strategies and visual languages. This article examines the cultural politics behind the production, circulation, and consumption of these videos and the sociospatial dynamics reflected in the rediscovering and repackaging of rural life on Chinese social media. This article contends that these videos, rather than bridging the urban–rural gap, as they seem to, in fact reveal the predicaments of China's urbanization process and suggest further (though subtle) urban–rural discrepancies.

*Keywords: microcelebrity, social media, short video, rurality, gentrification*

Following the 2016 breakout of microcelebrities (Senft, 2008) such as Papi Jiang, short videos, and the livestreaming industry in China (Iresearch, 2017; A. K. Li, 2019; Qin, 2016),<sup>1</sup> the Chinese social media landscape experienced another wave of Internet sensation—short videos depicting rural content, whose popularity has grown substantially. In both established social media platforms, such as Sina Weibo, and rapidly growing video-sharing and livestreaming apps such as Douyin, Kuaishou, and Xigua Video,<sup>2</sup> a growing army of rural-based videographers are turning views of China's rural lifescape into online short videos while attracting considerable fame and profit through stunning viewership totals (Yin, 2018).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Theresa Senft (2008) coined the term microcelebrity to refer to ordinary people who portray their personal lives on social media, gaining fame and popularity.

<sup>2</sup> The short-video app Douyin (known as TikTok to international users) has been downloaded more than one billion times as of early 2019, surpassing Instagram and challenging Facebook (Hamilton, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Social anthropologist Ian Convery and his colleagues define lifescape as “the complexity of the spatial, emotional and ethical dimensions of the relationship between landscape, livestock, farming and rural communities” (Convery, Mort, Baxter, & Bailey, 2008, p. 132).

Among these countryside cybercelebrities, platform-contracted *sannong* content creators (*sannong* refers to agriculture, farmers, and villages) showcase their lives of farming, animal husbandry, countryside cooking, and other routine daily life experiences through low-budget *tuwei* [earthy] videos ("Tuwei wenhua," 2018). Other videos with a refined quality attract viewers through a combination of pastoral idyll and preindustrial charm. Additionally, some vloggers also are successfully rendering their countryside living a synonym for utopia while generating tens of millions of domestic and international followers. The explosive growth of such rural-based digital content has become one of the most eye-catching phenomena on the Chinese Internet.

One thing that is particularly intriguing about these videos is how they have come to be "seen." Rural cybervideos or live broadcasting is not new on Chinese social media; apps such as Kuaishou and Douyin have been producing them in enormous volume (M. Li, Tan, & Yang, 2019; Lin & de Kloet, 2019). However, contrary to sheer subscriber quantity, the rural content on those sites has limited "visibility." This low visibility, rather than reflecting the (lack of) creativity of these "grassroots individuals," speaks more to the discursive marginalization that this demographic has received (Lin & de Kloet, 2019). As critics have observed, some activities (such as unflattering pranks, stunts, or dare shows) that Kuaishou users often broadcast are viewed to result from, and in turn reflect, the lower socioeconomic backgrounds of the app's users (Dudarenok & Hallanan, 2018).<sup>4</sup> Such rural content does not meet the horizon of the urban middle-class, whose tastes almost hegemonically prescribe legitimacy (B. Zhang, 2017). Along with the content creators' "tasteless" behaviors, the rural areas constituting the background in these Kuaishou videos are also viewed as backward, unintelligible, and absurd, to be only disdained or pitied, if not ignored by the urban-based netizens (B. Zhang, 2017). However, compared with these "invisible" videos, the countryside vloggers examined in this article are well received and enthusiastically followed by viewers from various social strata, especially urban users. Their videos are almost unanimously celebrated as genuine and authentic, and the rural-urban disjuncture prominent in apps such as Kuaishou seems to have been replaced by understanding, appreciation, and even celebration of the rural life.

This article analyzes Chinese social media's rediscovery and repackaging of the rural lifescape and examines the sociocultural dynamics behind the production, circulation, and consumption of these videos. It would be easy to argue that such videos are primarily consumed as an exoticization of rural life and appropriated by urban dwellers as an antidote to the fragmented, alienating everyday life and urban-centered (post-) modern production mode. Yet, this observation, valid as it may seem, not only inadequately addresses the underlining complexity of the phenomenon, but also oversimplifies the interweaving dynamics among the content producers, digital platforms, and end users. This analysis first explores the social, economic, and technological factors contributing to the rapid rise of these rural Chinese microcelebrities and showcases the taxonomy of individual entrepreneurship, technological development, state policy, and commercial capital behind this rapidly growing enterprise. I then examine the multiplicity of rurality appropriated in the videos, contending that these videos, rather than ostensibly bridging the urban-rural gap, actually reveal the deepening predicaments of China's urbanization process and suggest further

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<sup>4</sup> Scholars have pointed out that Kuaishou targets young audiences in third- and fourth-tier cities and the countryside with a down-to-earth style popular in these areas, particularly given that this demographic is often ignored by major established social media platforms (Dudarenok & Hallanan, 2018).

(though subtle) urban–rural discrepancies. Case studies of three rural video types that I categorize based on their content and visual language form the body of this article. These productions, despite a wide range of filming techniques and visual qualities, all embody sophisticated narrative strategies and claim to reflect a “genuine,” “authentic” and “organic” countryside. Therefore, by unpacking the rediscovering and repackaging of rural life in these videos, this analysis demonstrates the contested cultural dynamics and power hierarchy behind the spectacle-ization of the rural lifescape on Chinese social media.

### **“Homecoming,” (Imagined) Rurality, and “Zi meiti” Platform Politics**

China’s industrial development and resulting urbanization since Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 reform policies created the world’s largest rural-to-urban migration flow (Liu, Liu, Jin, & Qi, 2017; Seeborg, Jin, & Zhu, 2000; K. H. Zhang & Song, 2003). The massive recruiting and (re)producing of the “surplus agrarian labor” to fuel the manufacturing chains in urban centers has significantly reshaped the natural and social-economic landscape of Chinese rural areas (Ban, 2018). The rural population decline and the nationwide resource tilt toward the cities has not only led to an array of challenges (such as land abandonment, hollow villages, and left-behind elderly and children) in the rural areas (Liu et al., 2017; Yan, 2003), but also indelibly imprinted the Chinese countryside with images of aging, isolation, backwardness, and decay. At the same time, cities are not only favored for development opportunities, but also discursively established as progressive and modern.

Accompanying the unprecedented urbanization, migrant workers’ mobility and marginality, and displacement (from the countryside) and emplacement (into city life) have also captured scholarly attention (Ban, 2018; Sun, 2014; Yue, Li, & Feldman, 2016). Perennial institutionalized barriers such as the *hukou* [household registration] system and the “parasitic” urban economy create “dual communities” of urban residents and rural migrants in Chinese cities (Shen, 2003). Especially in recent years, the rapid increase of urban area living costs and feelings of rootlessness and isolation in the city has led many migrant workers to return to the countryside. Interestingly, the young cyberentrepreneurs discussed here, mainly in their 20s and 30s, are all migrants who once worked in major cities, but eventually returned to their rural homes for various familial and economic reasons. Consequently, scholarship on “rural gentrification,” a phenomenon in Western countries with high urbanization rates, offers a telling frame to examine this cybersensation of rural content. Although rural gentrification, as explained next, substantially differs in the Chinese context, it provides an illuminating perspective to understand the mentality behind the reenchantment with the countryside. “Rural gentrification” was first used by Western scholars to describe the profound changes caused by the influx of affluent urban dwellers to the British countryside and has drawn significant scholarly attention (Cloke, Phillips, & Thrift, 1998; Ghose, 2004; Little, 1987; Pahl, 1965). Rural gentrification studies have pinpointed several defining causes and impacts of urban–rural migration. First, these rural arrivals (mostly the new urban middle class) are attracted by the rural idyll while becoming increasingly weary of standardized, uniformed urban or suburban living (Cloke et al., 1998; Ghose, 2004). Second, the economic nature of rural gentrification is essentially an experiential economy because the urban dwellers arrive with a desire for aestheticized consumption of the rural landscape, activities, and social relationships (Hines, 2010, 2012; Phillips, 1993, 2009). Third, as the newcomers consume rural aesthetics, their activities also become part of the restructuring of a rural socioeconomic morphology (Qian, He, & Liu, 2013). The first two elements observed in the Western rural gentrification are also prominent in the Chinese

context and can account for the mentality behind watching these rural personalities as well as the nature of this consumption. As for the impact of these rural microcelebrities, the Chinese cyberconsumption of the rurality, compounded by the deep integration of social media and e-commerce in China, is also exerting changes to the rural social-economic structure (discussed next).

Aside from the similarities, however, the differences between the two are probably more illuminating. Most obviously, unlike the Western rural gentrification, in which members of the urban middle class physically relocate to the countryside, I argue that there are dual agents in the Chinese context—rural digital influencers who produce these vlogs (as proxy agents), and viewers who consume such online content. The rural vloggers who returned to the countryside are actually former rural residents who quit urban life and returned to their countryside homes. Therefore, if Western rural gentrification results largely from a high level of industrialization and urbanization, the rural immigration (homecoming, to be more exact) in the Chinese situation reveals the predicament of Chinese urbanization at this point. These successful videographers, to a certain extent, are transformed into or assisted by what Wang (2019) terms the rural “information elites,” who “competently appropriate information technologies to their advantage” (p. 5233) and can creatively translate the rural aesthetics into appealing powers in their digital productions. Moreover, while the urban afferents relocate and experience the countryside in person in Western rural gentrification scenarios, the Chinese viewers’ consumption of the rurality through the short videos is essentially a mediated experience. In this mediated experience, multiple factors, such as mobile devices, platform mechanisms, and social-political interventions, all come together to make it a substantially different experience than Western-style rural gentrification.

The penetration of smartphones (especially affordable domestic brands), the fast 4G and 5G networks, and the extension of social media usage to the third- and fourth-tier cities and the rural areas have enabled the rural population to make themselves seen and heard.<sup>5</sup> With the advancement of communication technologies, the production of the rural content videos embodies Virno’s (2004) notions of “the social factory” and “immaterial labour” where social productions are no longer limited to factory or office (or the rural fields in this case), but rather “produce immaterial goods, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge or communication” (Hardt & Negri, 2000, p. 290). In addition to this technological dimension, a state-commerce alliance in the platformization of these rural cultural production looms even more crucial. As Yu Hong (2017) points out, in the 2000s, the Chinese government adopted a techno-economic discourse while strongly promoting economic restructuring, with digital media and technology as the new driving forces. Allied with the state’s call to finding e-solutions for economic growth are the major digital conglomerates’ efforts in developing a networked digital economy (Yu, 2017). As urban-centered e-entrepreneurship and e-consumerism gradually reach a plateau, rural digital entrepreneurship is increasingly regarded as a new propeller for sustaining China’s e-commerce boom (Leong, Pan, Newell, & Cui, 2016) and becomes more foregrounded. For example, in July 2018, Bytedance announced that it would

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<sup>5</sup> According the 44th China Statistical Report on Internet Development (August 2019) and a report from the China Internet Network Information Center, China’s rural netizen population has reached 225 million, and the rate of accessing the Internet through mobile devices is as high as 99.1%. More than 28 million Chinese people are estimated to be involved in rural area e-commerce (China Internet Network Information Center, 2019).

pour at least 500 million RMB into supporting sannong creators and soon launched a government-endorsed program to encourage local Internet celebrities to promote their hometowns. Similarly, Douyin's competitor Kuaishou also launched a "Happy Village" campaign to support its more than 3.75 million users from the relatively poor areas (Yin, 2018).

Viewed in this light, while the rural videographers routinely describe their unintentional celebrification as serendipitous, it remains quite clear that behind each entrepreneur's success story is a complex social-economic package enabling the individual story to materialize. In this sense, the label that they adopt for themselves, "*zi meiti*" (often translated as "self media" or "we media") is somewhat misleading, if not deceptive. Each *zi meiti* production is not a private, singular subject, but rather part of a new media ecosystem of complex individual, political, and commercial initiatives (Hua, Leong, & Yu, 2017). Therefore, the resulting reenchantment of the rural lifescape in the *zi meiti* era is indeed a platform-based phenomenon involving rural cyberproducers, consumers, sponsors and other stakeholders in an evolving digital ecosystem. The e-platforms (including both e-commerce and social media) are enablers and rule makers, whereas the talented "grassroots individuals" are "constantly mobilized and calculated according to the workings of the platform" (Lin & de Kloet, 2019, p. 1).<sup>6</sup>

The following section examines the repackaging of rurality by three groups of rural microcelebrities. Although their works all address the rural landscape, activities, and social relations, their videos vary in visual qualities, narrative strategies, and dynamics in engaging their target audience. Viewed together, the spectacle-ization of the rural lifescape demonstrates how rurality is socially constructed and reconstructed on Chinese social media.

### **Rural Revitalization, Authenticity and "*Yuanshengtai*" Countryside**

The rural microcelebrities examined in this section are mainly the so-called sannong stars—rural videographers who distinctly label themselves as "*nongren*" [farmers] and serialize their videos under the *nongren* category. Originally filmed by themselves or family members with rudimentary devices, these videos usually feature unadorned recordings of their daily activities at home and in the field. The crude video quality is often viewed as a testimonial of the amateurship, which, as argued next, often contributes to an aura of genuineness and authenticity. The rural life represented in their videos, though inherently unglamorous, becomes somehow especially captivating. Some vloggers also sell local specialty products through the videos, translating rural aesthetics into substantial economic gains.

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<sup>6</sup> The vicissitudes of one of China's most famous rural microcelebrities, Huanzi, provides a telling case in this regard. Quitting his job as a security guard in Guangzhou and returning to his rural home in Guizhou province in 2016, Huanzi was one of the earliest and most popular rural digital influencers on Bytedance's Toutiao, an all-purpose "super app" that combines news feed, video-sharing, and social media functions. After allegedly not cooperating with Toutiao's monopoly of his productions, Huanzi lost Toutiao's "support." Now, without the traffic that the platform's algorithm directed to him, his online visibility has decreased tremendously ("Ouxiang de huanghun," 2018).

First, the 38-year-old Qiaofu jiumei [Wise woman ninth sister], a warm-tempered, versatile, and skillful housewife from an impoverished Guangxi province village, remains one of the most famous in this regard.<sup>7</sup> In 2017, her college graduate nephew, seeing the upcoming short video boom, talked her into posting videos of her everyday cooking online and began serving as an intermediary between her, online customers, and the platforms (his e-literacy clearly made him the “information elite” in this campaign). Soon viewers began to inquire about the fruits from the orchards frequently appearing in her videos. Thanks to the e-commerce network and offline infrastructure, not only did her individual produce business take off, but it also soon snowballed into a franchise that mobilized and benefitted her fellow villagers. Now cooperating with Alibaba’s Tmall, China’s largest e-commerce platform, she has almost single-handedly transformed her village’s local economy. Though by now a national celebrity, she still diligently uploads multiple videos each day for her many millions of fans across various platforms. Similar to Qiaofu jiumei, Xiangye yatou [Wild country girl], a young ethnic-minority housewife from Hunan province, also attracts millions of followers through videos about her hometown’s natural landscape, unique food culture, ethnic customs, and her family’s daily life.<sup>8</sup> The large viewership also enables her to sell homegrown products and promote local tourism. In addition to these two female celebrities, the two-man team of Hu Yueqing and Liu Suliang (together known as Huanong xiongdi [Chinese farmer brothers]) has also generated huge subscriber numbers. In 2017, after returning from manufacturing factory work in Shenzhen to his hometown in Ganzhou, Jiangxi province, Hu started raising large rodents called bamboo rats. He partnered with fellow town resident Liu Suliang, whose digital literacy (mainly acting as the cameraman, video editor, and content poster) complements Hu’s on-screen eloquence. Their videos showcase Hu’s barn to boost bamboo rat sales, and they emerged as an unexpected Internet sensation as a result of their “100 absurd excuses” for eating bamboo rats. In their videos, Hu ventures to the barn to check on the bamboo rats and often randomly selects one, with excuses that viewers find absurd yet amusing. He then cooks the chosen rat in an outdoor setting, often next to a creek with a campfire and handmade bamboo cookware.

These three cases exemplify key elements associated with the countryside reenchantment. First, all the self-enterprising video protagonists are farmers who returned to their rural homes from the cities. Interestingly, this background is especially highlighted in their publicity materials. For example, reports on Xiangye yatou emphasize that “a former hospital midwife making headlines by carrying a fishing basket,” while Qiaofu jiumei is praised as “a former noodle factory migrant sister making 1.5 million [RMB] each month through e-commerce” (“Cong nongmin,” 2017, para. 40). Such headlines juxtapose their relatively insignificant urban jobs with their huge commercial successes achieved after returning to the countryside. Not necessarily intending to degrade cities, these headlines indeed send the signal that China’s rural areas are the new lands of opportunity, especially to certain demographics like theirs. Other than celebrating their

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<sup>7</sup> Though Qiaofu jiumei now mainly markets her rural identity, when she initially started her video career, she used a Western-style cartoon chef image as her profile photo. This cartoon image, featuring blonde hair, a toque blanche, and an apron, clearly conveyed what she and her team considered to be modern or appealing to audiences at that time. Despite the blocking of YouTube in China, all the microcelebrities discussed in this article operate well-maintained YouTube channels. Qiaofu jiumei’s channel can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2lcOnsSgXlxNeeNwaztpow/videos>.

<sup>8</sup>For Xiangye yatou’s YouTube channel, see <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCEW2bFMzQSSf5N3zfMMYqrw>.

personal success stories, media headlines such as “Behind Qiaofu jiumei and Nongcun sigu [Fourth Brother of the Village], a Brand New Rural Society Is Shaping Up” (Y. Zhang, 2019) and “Qiaofu jiumei—New Internet Celebrity Who Seizes the Golden Timing of Rural Revitalization” (Voice of Chinese Countryside, 2019a) also seek to convey that these individual successes are the result of, and at the same time contribute to, a grand historical period of rural revitalization. Together, their videos, the corresponding media rhetoric, and influx of commercial capital all seek to convince viewers that the Chinese countryside is no longer a land of abandonment, but rather a place of vitality and new economic opportunities.<sup>9</sup>

Second, the videos are all celebrated for their representation of *yuanshengtai* [rural life]. Coined by China-based scholars and media, *yuanshengtai* is often conceptualized as the idea of the “unpolluted native” in Western anthropology and is usually used to signal a kind of “untainted original and humankind’s relationship with the natural environment” (Kendall, 2019, p. 78). Western tourism studies scholars argue that Western tourists typically search for authenticity in sites that they consider both remote (spatially distanced) and premodern (temporally distanced; Kendall, 2019). This insight also holds true for the cybertourism through Chinese rural-content videos, where digital celebrities sell a real-time, real-life documentation of rurality featuring an untouched and uncontaminated natural setting.

However, a closer look could easily reveal how authentication strategies are used and how *yuanshengtai* countryside scenes are carefully curated and orchestrated to create an attractive rusticity. For example, known for her county-style cooking, Qiaofu jiumei’s videos are often set in her large outdoor kitchen. Although nothing like a modern urban kitchen with fancy gadgets, Qiaofu jiumei’s bright and clean kitchen and her simple but effective countryside cooking tools and techniques maintain a careful balance between appearing “outlandish,” yet still appropriate in terms of sanitary levels and basic functionality. In addition, her open-floor kitchen also serves as a space where her hospitality, family values, and communal relationships—in other words, the countryside activities and ethics—are fully displayed. Videos of her orchards typically show only fruits near the harvesting phase, conveniently omitting the hard work leading to that stage. The video authenticity and produce quality are often affirmed by featuring her and admiring visitors from afar strolling together in the orchards. As they taste fruit in the orchard, viewers sense that they are experiencing the “real” countryside as well. In Huanong xiongdì’s videos, the hardship of rural farm work is completely displaced by the cuteness of the bamboo rats, and although the two vloggers cook the rodent, the killing and cleaning scenes are always omitted to avoid graphic disturbance. Their unpristine kitchen and rustic cooking style are also amusingly excused as an expression of their masculinity and the rawness of rural life. Accompanying the video content, the camera skillfully cuts between different shot distances and angles to mix up the rhythm, and the occasional drone shots captivate viewers with aerial views of the village. In these purported representations of the *yuanshengtai* rural life, the harsh rural

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<sup>9</sup> Another example involves a young graduate student, favorably called “rural fairy lady,” who left Beijing to introduce new strawberry-growing techniques and marketing strategies to rural farmers. In an article titled “Entrepreneurship Is ‘Strawberry Flavored,’” calculated rhetoric is used to celebrate her return to the countryside. For example, the report uses “phoenix returning to the nest,” a much lauded image to describe the girl’s rural “homecoming.” Cleverly devised labels such as “new farmers,” “rural elite,” and “green collar” are also used to compare their work to the urban “white-collar” people, and hence elevate the status of these rural jobs and encourage more career choices such as this one (Voice of Chinese Countryside, 2019b).

conditions, highly demanding labor-intensive work, unsanitary environment, and often complicated kinship relationships are all conveniently erased to give way to the perceived old-fashioned rural lifestyle, work ethic, and mundane, yet warm, life.<sup>10</sup>

Third, even though much of the video content features agricultural production, the video productions themselves are more about packaging personalities and genuineness, and building (emotional) connections between the vloggers and viewers. In other words, selling the local products has become a by-product of the video production. Viewers purchase local specialties shown in the videos, but what is actually consumed is the content creators' character and the "intimacy" constructed between them and the viewers. Scholars argue that connectedness, accessibility, ordinariness, intimacy, and authenticity are central elements in microcelebrities' performances (Jerslev, 2016; Marwick, 2013, 2015; Raun, 2018). All these rural vloggers admit that maintaining the quality and frequency of the video postings and prompt interaction with the followers remains as important as, if not more important than, conducting the e-commerce business. In this sense, the active rural agents in the Chinese context demonstrate how microcelebrities use "affective labour" or "emotional labour" to capitalize on intimacy (Raun, 2018).

Overall, this group of videos demonstrates an intriguing paradox regarding imageries of Chinese rural society. On the one hand, the videos defy the prevalent perception of the Chinese countryside as backward or abandoned. Instead, the videos' popularity emerges from selling exactly the opposite of this perception (i.e., the rural area instead is active, vibrant, and revitalized). However, positive and appealing rural area images remain an extension of the rural-urban dualistic perspective. If previously, the countryside was seen as less developed and in need of change, these videos seek to demonstrate that the much-needed change is actually taking place. The celebration of the rural vitality remains predicated on the assumption that the countryside can be modernized and is being modernized. In this mediated gaze on countryside life, consumers look on the rural world through the proxy agents and IT mediators. They consume the rural resources (both the tangible local specialties and the intangible rurality imagery) through comments and likes on social media. In this light, the rural space constructed in this relationship almost becomes a new cybercolony (Hines, 2010).

### **Ethnicity, Rural Idyll, and the Aestheticization of Everyday Life**

If the sannong videos represent the crude yuanshengtai countryside, then productions from Yunnan microcelebrity Dianxi xiaoge (Little brother of West Yunnan) feature more refined countryside images

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<sup>10</sup> Because all these rural vloggers manage to show a joyful and harmonious marital relationship in their videos, gender issues become especially interesting in the female-led videos. For example, while Qiaofu jumei and Xiangye yatou always perform the traditional wifely household chores such as cooking and cleaning in their videos, as the protagonists of their published works, they are actually in the public sphere while their husbands assume more domestic roles and appear to support their wives' entrepreneurship wholeheartedly. This gender relationship reversal remains an appealing aspect of their public images.



through professional filming and editing work.<sup>11</sup> Going back to her rural home in Yunnan after years of urban life, Dianxi xiaoge showcases a variety of eye-pleasing (sometimes exotic) Yunnan culinary culture and ethnic customs and contracted in early 2019 with MCN (multichannel network) Papitube, a vlog production company founded by China's arguably most famous microcelebrity, Papi Jiang. Compared with the digital productions discussed earlier, her videos feature less dialogue, more visual imageries, and heavier postproduction editing. The different atmosphere and sentiment conveyed through her videos make her work a valuable text for examining the dynamics between the commodification of rural idyll and the aestheticization of everyday life.

It is quite obvious that the popularity of her videos emanates from a combination of Yunnan's beautiful and tranquil sceneries, unique (if not exotic) ingredients and cooking techniques, and an idyllic countryside lifestyle. For example, thanks to its perennially warm climate, Yunnan is known for growing flowers and using flowers in food and beverages. One of her videos, for instance, demonstrates making a multiple-dish meal with roses. The video begins with Dianxi xiaoge walking to the rose garden in appealing, springlike weather, showcasing along the way several delightful and pleasing countryside views. While in the rose garden, the rhythmically cut shots range between wide angles of the entire garden and close-ups of individual flowers to further show the breathtakingly attractive scenery. The four rose flower dishes presented at the end of the episode appear delicate, delicious, and truly unique. Another video showcases her feast made with "tripe-wrapped pork." Labeled as a "Yi nationality's feast for the most distinctive guests," this video demonstrates several meticulous, ethnically inspired techniques of preserving and cooking pork tripe. Because the curing of the meat takes two months, she inserts pillow shots to depict the passage of time. These shots also become snippet windows where viewers witness villagers' slow-paced, idyllic, and communal lives. Audiences inevitably notice that in her videos, Dianxi xiaoge often dons a plain shirt and conical bamboo hat, creating a relatively simple, unadorned and accessible image. She also only uses rudimentary (if not primitive) countryside kitchen equipment, deliberately distancing her cooking from modern, urban cooking techniques. Her videos always end with her and her family (and sometimes other village members) enjoying the dishes in their traditional residential courtyard. Accompanied by soothing music, they eat and chat in their dialect, presenting viewers with a most intimate, homey, and harmonious atmosphere.

As evidenced by the comments for her videos across various platforms, the rural idyll visualized in her productions is highly attractive. However, this ostensibly peaceful pastoral life, rather than a truthful representation of rural life, is more of simulacrum constructed according to a normative idyllic dream. Leo Marx (1964), in his examination of the city dwellers' aspiration for idyllic ideal, argues that this sentiment is "generated by an urge to withdraw from civilization's growing power and complexity" (p. 9). Later scholars pointed out that rural idylls that portray rural life perennially "as simple, innocent and virtuous" is "part of a pastoral myth of a lost Eden, divorced from harsher realities of rural life and masking exploitation and oppression" (Shucksmith, 2018, p. 163). Not only is this portrayal not innocent, but it is also normative and power infused (Halfacree, 1993; Shucksmith, 2018). In China, decades of rapid urbanization and the myriad of subsequent development-related anxieties have led to a noticeable nostalgia for the rural charm in mass

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<sup>11</sup> Dianxi xiaoge adopts this cybernickname because her hometown Dehong is in the southwestern area of Yunnan, the Chinese province whose alias is "Dian." The "xiaoge" [little brother] part of her online name, as she explains, suggests her boyish and outgoing personality.

media in recent years.<sup>12</sup> Compared with the less eloquent “earthy” vloggers, Dianxi xiaoge (especially after collaborating with the Papatube professional team) effectively articulates the anxiety of “flight from the city.” In a 2019 statement, she carefully explained to her followers her reason for returning to the Yunnan countryside. Other than her father’s surgery at that time, her homecoming was primarily attributed to evading the stresses of urban life. The long working hours, high living costs, and sense of rootlessness described in her heartfelt letter all speak to the very anxieties experienced by the urban (young) professionals. In contrast, the poetic countryside scenery, carefree atmosphere, and simple, innocent, and warm familial and communal relationships all become therapeutic elements. In this light, it is not that Dianxi xiaoge’s camera captures the reality of pastoral life in her village, but rather that her videos re-create a hyperreality of Yunnan countryside life according to the prescriptive imagination of the rural idyll.

The romanticized refuge from modernity embodied in Dianxi xiaoge’s video also goes hand in hand with an anticommercialistic sentiment. The hurried, stressful urban life is characterized as dominated by commercialism, rendering the countryside as the only place uncontaminated by consumeristic cultures. Ironically, this resistance of profit-driven commercialism is only accomplished through the very logic and logistics of consumerism. For example, the rose dishes video released on March 22, 2019, serves as a premier advertisement for the debut of her personal-branded rose flower cakes available in her online store. The introduction of a matcha flavor option (a Japan-imported flavor mainly favored by urban youth for its healthy and refreshing taste) two months later was mainly for boosting sales, hence “betraying” the originally stated mission to bring customers Yunnan “local flavors.” The rose cakes promotion boasts the best locally grown flowers, handmade dough, and air shipping, which enable the cakes to arrive within 24 hours of production. On the rose cake package, a traditional “flower and bird” painting (a much-favored subject of Chinese painting) is juxtaposed with images of an airplane and control tower to further emphasize the idea of speediness and freshness. Another example is her video on making a tofu skin snack—a food known for its high volume of plant-based protein. Two days after her tofu skin snack video was released, Dianxi xiaoge’s personal-branded tofu skin product line was rolled out in her e-store. The video and the product ad emphasize that her tofu skin is made with only natural soybean ingredients and water through extra painstaking steps that big factory production could not replicate. Although doing this significantly increases the cost, she claims that this method enables her customers to “taste the humanity of Yunnan.” Branding her products as “homemade” or “organic” and replacing the material consumption with emotional consumption, Dianxi xiaoge’s products appeal to customers seeking to replace the modern streamlined production with anything “unique” or “genuine.” However, as demonstrated, the very gesture of anticommercialization can only be realized through the commodification of her digital productions. In other words, Dianxi xiaoge and her customers have no choice but to resort to consumerism for anticommercializing.

Overall, Dianxi xiaoge’s countryside videos involve multiple paradoxes regarding the rural idyll. As for the “rural” aspect, her videos are filled with visual images of local ethnic and rural signifiers. These signs

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<sup>12</sup> This trend is especially obvious in television programs. From state-sponsored programs, such as CCTV’s *A Bite of China* (2012, 2014, 2018), which searches the countryside for the roots of Chinese food culture, to commercial variety shows such as *Where Are We Going, Dad?* (2013–2019) and *Back to Field* (2017–present), which take urban celebrities to experience life in the countryside, rural life has been used to answer the quest for a slower paced, simple, and pristine lifestyle (An, 2014; Wen, 2019).

and symbols of rurality are “re-territorialised as abstract significations in order to define the essential nature of rural space and lifestyles” (Qian et al., 2013, p. 333). In addition to local distinctiveness, her videos also seek to use the slow-paced rural temporality as an alternative social ordering to resist the time-space of urban living and capitalistic commodification. The rural life demonstrated in her videos is real, yet fantastic; is of slow-paced leisure, yet can only exist in fast-edited temporality; and is detached from commercialism, yet still highly commodified. In Dianxi xiaoge’s video, the aestheticization of everyday life blurs the boundaries of art, life, and fantasy. To viewers, the modern fantasy of rural idyll needs to be displayed as real life to be “true” or “believable”; however, for Dianxi xiaoge and her family, their everyday life can only be seen if it meets the horizon of such a fantasy.

### **Utopia Imagery, Cultural Heritage, and a Timeless China**

Despite seeming attempts to bring urban viewers closer to rural lifestyles and vice versa, the ironic paradoxes observed in the rural short videos discussed earlier all demonstrate an insidious rural–urban discrepancy, a disparity further intensified and translated into a “modern-tradition” dualism in the digital influencer Li Ziqi’s work. Li Ziqi is now an internationally hailed vlogger for her bohemian life that combines simplicity and romanticism in a small Sichuan village. Returning to her rural home in Mianyang, Sichuan province, to care for her aging grandmother, Li Ziqi follows a similar homecoming path as the other vloggers. First establishing herself as a *gufeng meishi bozhu* [neotraditional food vlogger], her career as a rural content vlogger experienced several vicissitudes. In 2017, she reemerged on various social media platforms with videos of her making “peach blossom wine,” whose production quality was dramatically improved compared with her earlier videos. Since then, she has been accumulating followers at an astonishing speed, both in China and around the world. In addition to gourmet videos, she has also posted videos of herself making traditional handicrafts ranging from handmade rouge to bamboo furniture, from silk quilts to homemade soy sauce. Among these, the best received are those featuring her reproducing cultural heritage items, such as movable-type printing, rough paper, and Sichuan embroidery.

Compared with videos discussed in the previous two sections, the rural life in Li Ziqi’s video is even more “dreamy” and romanticized. The bohemian and therapeutic lifestyle conveyed in the videos serves to ease the anxiety of urban dwellers and invoke a deeply rooted cultural longing for “returning to nature,” making them appealing as an ultimate utopian ideal. But this utopian imagery actually results from a sophisticated orchestration of setting, cinematography, narrative strategy, and postproduction editing. Her videos usually begin with a wide-angle or aerial shot of some breathtaking rural-natural landscape, where the cloud-surrounded peaks and flowery valleys allude to a hermitage lifestyle. Most ingredients are derived from the surrounding mountain or her garden, suggesting a simple “living off the land” existence and insinuating that she is not only resourceful, but also living in a self-contained, self-sufficient wonderland. She usually dons a modified version of Chinese traditional clothing made with rough fabric, and she exerts the most traditional tools using sophisticated techniques and skills. Other than minimal dialogue with her grandma in their dialect, she hardly speaks in her videos, let alone interacting with viewers as do the other vloggers. The professional filming and editing techniques yield a high-quality digital product with a sophisticated visual language. In the videos, she appears to be a self-sustaining hermit living a solitary and secluded life in a romantically idealized countryside.

If rural life in Dianxi xiaoge's videos is supposed to be taken as real and consumed for its "truthfulness," then, interestingly, there is an unspoken but mutually accepted agreement on the theatricality involved in the romantic countryside life constructed in Li Ziqi's videos. In her earlier videos, Li Ziqi's clothing (such as some pseudotraditional long dresses) appears more like stage costumes, and the dishes may signal more aestheticized appeal than everyday dining, essentially evoking a mini-period drama in some of her early videos. Later, she also constantly communicated with her followers in long texts confessing that her home was not the self-sustained utopia it looked like, nor was her life the poeticized, carefree one portrayed on screen. Rather, as she repeatedly explained, she was just selectively filming what was available in her courtyard, which might have inadvertently created an unintentional illusion for the viewers. And rather than being a truthful representation of her life, what she films is the life that she herself aspires and wants to pursue.<sup>13</sup> It is quite clear that this repackaged rural spectacle plays on a nostalgic longing for a less complicated, preindustrial landscape and life, and it provides a temporary illusion of achieving it. Therefore, her self-initiated action of disillusioning does not repel the viewers; instead, it helps to create a subtle balance where both parties are willing to suspend the issue of "truthfulness" of the video content, switch the focus to "genuineness," and enjoy this artistry diegesis that blurs the boundary between art and real life.

Other than her sophisticatedly crafted food videos, what distinguishes Li Ziqi from the other rural microcelebrities and has further earned her transnational popularity is her reproduction of traditional handcrafts and cultural products. If making a clay oven or a wooden pavilion solely by herself merely astonishes viewers regarding her hands-on ability, her creation of a set of bamboo couches and silk comforters—products bearing distinct Chinese cultural signifiers—takes on a more meaningful significance of culture preservation. A prominent example is her video "The Scholar's Four Jewels of China" (published March 25, 2019); in this video, over the course of two years (from autumn 2017 to spring 2019), she demonstrates how to make a calligraphy brush, inkstick, paper, and ink stone (Li, 2019). Audiences witness a "how-to" approach of selected key steps in making these four items, all symbols of traditional literati culture. The video culminates in scenes where she demonstrates the handmade crafts to a Thai royal family, rendering her a transnational ambassador for promoting Chinese culture. In other videos, she documents how she traveled to learn (in)tangible cultural heritages deemed endangered, such as wooden moveable-type printing and embroidery. The combined sense of urgency of preserving these Chinese traditions and her DIY reproduction of cultural products set her apart from the other rural vloggers and has earned her both domestic and international popularity.

Unsurprisingly, these videos are vehemently praised by both Chinese and international viewers. For Chinese viewers, the items are taken as symbols of traditional (high) literati culture. If the videos examined in the previous two sections speak to the urban dwellers' emotional need of "city escaping," then Li Ziqi's cultural heritage videos keenly address the contemporary viewers' (especially middle-class) anxieties regarding a disjuncture with tradition. Her food videos create a nostalgic lure of a preindustrial, detached, simplistic mode of living, while her cultural heritage reproduction videos, conveyed through a

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<sup>13</sup> Li Ziqi expresses this in the exclusive interview she had with the Goldthread, a social media outlet on Chinese culture <https://www.goldthread2.com/culture/exclusive-behind-scenes-li-ziqi/article/3027104>.

gentrified imagery and coupled with the poeticized countryside views, reignite a fascination for tradition while simultaneously creating the illusion of reconnection with them.

For international viewers, Li Ziqi's videos, especially those involving cultural products, create a quintessential "Chinese" space for cyberconsumption. For example, the video in which she makes the silk quilt is titled, "Ancient Oriental Methods of the Sericulture." The video description further emphasizes the antiquity and uniqueness of this culture by asserting that "China is the first country to invent silkworm rearing in the world; silk is also a symbol of ancient oriental culture." Similarly, the movable-type printing video description states that this practice is "engraved with the essence of the ancient Chinese culture" and further adds to the sense of urgency that "wisdom of our ancestors" is getting "lost in history." The recurring rhetoric of "ancient," "Orient," and "Chinese culture" is further visualized by frequent pillow shots of a secluded mountain village (resembling Chinese traditional landscape paintings) and the ubiquitous presence of props such as plum blossoms, bamboo, or lotus flowers, conventionally taken as signifiers of Chinese-ness. For domestic viewers, the village in Li Ziqi's video becomes a repository of traditional heritage in need of preservation, and the rural space represents a refuge of preindustrial Chinese (im)material culture. For international viewers, the countryside lifestyle piques the imagination of a (mysterious) Oriental agricultural civilization. A fairylike young Oriental lady, exotic but attractive ingredients, and primeval connections to nature further contribute to this imagination. Therefore, the rural space in her video has become a secluded (if not isolated), traditional (if on unchanging), and timeless (if not stagnant) China. Viewed in this light, with appealing elements for both domestic and global marketing, Li Ziqi's videos construct a postindustrial cybercultural space by creating a preindustrial, idyllic, utopian rural life.

Li Ziqi's imagery of a "cultured" countryside further enters the public horizon through official endorsements. Given her cyberinfluencer status, the Palace Museum Food Department contracted with Li Ziqi in 2018 to "create health food products to meet the customers' needs; bridge between traditional culture and youth mass" ("Xin chuantong," 2018, para.1). Recently, in response to controversy over whether Li Ziqi's works can be counted as China's *wenhua shuchu* [cultural output], multiple state media channels all praised her works as a window to "showcase a multicultural and beautiful contemporary China" (Zheng, 2019, para. 2). The Palace Museum cooperation slogan, "To revive tradition through hearty inheritance," clearly reveals the cultural and economic politics behind the official endorsement. Although the official high culture institution seeks to connect to contemporary customers, especially younger populations growing up in the social media age, a private entrepreneur like Li Ziqi seeks the official (if not "imperial") recognition of being a legitimate advocate for the tradition. In effect, each is appropriating the other's cultural capital. Likewise, while Beijing seeks "soft power" outreach, an apolitical and disarming private foodie channel conveniently offers a safe choice to endorse.

### Conclusion

China's industrialization and urbanization over the last few decades primarily revolved around cities, which led to an ever widening rural-urban disparity. In this rural-urban dichotomy, Chinese rural areas have been appropriated as multiple signifiers. On the one hand, as the antithesis to urban-centered ideas of progressiveness and modernity, rural areas are viewed as backward and abandoned. However, as the anxieties over urbanization deepen, rural areas are reembraced as an imagined utopia under the guise

of “city flight” sentiments and narratives. The nostalgia over a romanticized, preindustrial past led to the countryside becoming rediscovered and represented through a gentrified perspective. Through this lens, the countryside signifies the urban dwellers’ escape from cramped lifestyles, poor air quality, and an exhausting and mechanistic life replete with growing social disparities. The therapeutic effect perceived in the organic and fulfilling rural life renders it a social-cultural spectacle eliciting a wide gaze, especially from younger Chinese viewers.

Although this observation may explain one aspect regarding the reemergence of the rural lifescape in the public horizon, the social media platforms and the active participation of the rural microcelebrities add extra dimensions to the explosion of rural short videos. As mediators in this rural–urban equation, the zi meiti vloggers recode the rural lifescape and enable them to enter the horizon of netizens. The vloggers’ enchanting depictions of rural life not only appeal to audiences’ emotional needs (especially urban viewers), but also further generate nostalgic longings from the viewers. Assisted by new media technology and platforms, their combination of zi meiti power and e-commerce contributes to the restructuring of the local economic landscape, rendering this new emergent class of vloggers not solely as online content creators, but also as active game changers reshaping the rural–urban equation.

While activities on each side seem to try to reach the other party more, the rural–urban discrepancy continues to widen behind the video images. Behind the spectacle-ization of the rural lifescape in these short videos, “the materialities and meanings of rural spaces are constantly being produced, reproduced and contested depending on, and along with, the identities of social actors” (Galani-Moutafi, 2013, p. 104). For the rural vloggers, the very efforts to meet the audience horizon are to appropriate (if not manipulate), and therefore reinforce, the rural–urban differences. For the urban consumers, the real-time access to the rurality through social media and the convenient availability of the organic, homemade rural specialties offer merely an illusion, however appealing and desirable, of countryside living. While audiences enjoy experiencing the rural life as a virtual reality, their distance to the rural space is not bridged, but further widened.

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