

THE RURAL VIDEO INFLUENCERS IN CHINA: ON THE NEW EDGE OF
URBANIZATION

A Thesis

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by

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ABSTRACT

On the new media platforms in China, especially the video platforms, some rural content has become quite influential, which is, to some extent, inconsistent with people's impression of the vulnerable position of rural areas the urban-rural inequality. This thesis studied some of the most popular the rural content producers with the close reading of their videos, explaining how they frame themselves and their artworks and what kind of "rurality" is performed to the audiences. While the audience might assign them as rural figures, these people were on the edge of the urban and the rural as they had a shared history as some people who were from the rural areas, spent a period of their lives as migrant workers, and finally became video influencers performing some kind of rural lifestyle.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Xinwen Zhang was born in Shenyang, China, and spent the first 18 years of her life there. Then, she went to Sun Yat-sen University and entered Boya college, which sets no determined major and emphasizes on text close reading to explore potential for students. She finally chose anthropology as the major and researched the breakfast stalls in New Phoenix Village. She went to the village and had close contact with the migrant workers running breakfast stalls and people at breakfast, mainly focusing on the population identification, identity cognition, and community construction of the migrant population as well as their dilemma. After graduation from Sun Yat-sen University, Xinwen joined the Cornell community as a master student in Asian Studies in 2018, concentrating on contemporary Chinese culture. In this period, in addition to academic studies, she also had internships in Chinses live streaming companies and social media platforms. With these experience in the internet industry, she started to dive into the unique role of migrant workers on the internet.

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GLOSSARY AND LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

hukou	户口 the household registration system used in mainland China
liudong	流动人口 official translation: the floating population. People who move away
renkou	from their registered city for hukou
mangliu	盲流 the abbreviation for “盲目流动人口” (floating population without clear plan) a discriminative term referring to the rural-to-urban migrants.
nongmingong	农民工 farmers who have worked outside the township for six months or more, or local farmers who have engaged in non-agricultural industry inside the township for six months or more
sannong	三农：农业、农村、农民 Three “rural” : agriculture, rural areas, and farmers
xiaolingtong	小灵通 a mobile phone system based on PHS technology
ACG	Anime, Comic and Games
CNNIC	The China Internet Network Information Center
GFW	Great Fire-Wall
MAU	Monthly active users
MCN	multi-channel network
MIIT	Ministry of Industry and Information Technology of China
NHFPC	National Health and Family Planning Commission
PRC	People's Republic of China
ROC	Republic of China

TVE Township and Village Enterprises

1. Introduction

In the recent decade, as the internet infrastructures have developed rapidly, people have witnessed various new features of the internet and numerous changes that it has brought to society. The internet has become part of people's lives all over the world, and people in China seem to be accustomed to relying on the internet in various ways. People in 2010 might have found it hard to imagine China would quickly become a cashless society, or individuals would use a QR code to prove their health condition during a pandemic (Legal Daily 法制日报, 2020). Now in 2020, we might ask, is this new lifestyle common to every Chinese or just limited to some rich areas? What are the experiences of people in rural areas, who are the primary victims of the digital divide in China?

Indeed, rural areas have become an unavoidable topic when discussing the internet recently. Many companies are paying more attention to the traditionally neglected poorer areas. When the internet infrastructure is pushed farther spatially, their business is not limited to the large cities but could be extended further both spatially and socially. While the metropolitan areas are existing market spaces where they have to pay more for gaining new users, the small towns and the rural areas leave more opportunities to them. While TikTok in the US, in some journalists' observation, is using various tactics to keep certain users out— mainly adults, to please the core target users, the teenagers (Albury & Savic, n.d.) — its original version in China is investing a lot workforce and capital trying hard to gain users from the small towns and rural areas(Caasdata 卡思数据, 2019). Despite being part of the commercial marketing, TikTok's strategies supported the producing or

curating rural content. TikTok is not the only platform that has rural content. Videos about rural areas have appeared on various video platforms in China.

On the one hand, at first glance with a superficial understanding, this seems only to be an inevitable result of the internet companies' choices for the best commercial benefit. But on the other hand, given a bit more scrutiny, this seems to be a turning point for China's social environment. Rural-urban power inequality has a long history. In regard of culture production, the rural regions are mainly considered as passive receiver of the mainstream culture from cities.(Shi Qianran 施倩然, 2019). People from the countryside can be portrayed, displayed, and even sympathized, but they hardly had any channel to present themselves. In the 1950s and 1960s, when rural content was highly valued during the emphasis on class struggle at that time, they were depicted as symbols, mainly by creators of "mainstream culture" in cities. Then, as the political considerations in artworks content gradually decreased, the inequality between urban and rural areas showed more straightforwardly in media. In the eye of mass media, most of people from rural areas are depicted as backward, traditional, alien outsiders when they can enter the cities in the reform era.

Recently, the rural voices not only exist but are influential. In January 2020, after exceeding subscribers to another popular account, the most subscribed mainland China content creator on YouTube became Li Ziqi, who films rural content. In addition to those who produce rural content only, many people amid top Chinese influencers occasionally post videos related to their rural identity. And people can easily find a large part of Chinese

memes is relevant to those rural influencers. Those recent changes leave people an illusion about the reversal of rural-urban power structure. It seems that with the help of internet technologies, the city is no longer the dominant cultural center, but the countryside has become the desired place for many people. This judgment is obviously arbitrary, but what is the complicated situation behind it? What kind of change has taken place in the rural area about internet access? How and to which extent has this access brought new content to the internet? Has this new trend helped to change the uneven relationship between rural and urban areas? This study will analyze the existing data and have a close reading of the typical rural content, to answer all the questions listed above.

2. A brief history of the rural-urban relationship in China

The binary opposition between the countryside is the basis for many people to understanding countryside. However, only with the two concepts— the rural and the urban— even the most basic questions about rural content cannot be answered perfectly: Who portrays the rural? Neither urbanites nor rural residents is a proper definition of those influential rural content creators. Although it is true that rural and urban are words in pairs, the rural-urban relationship, rather than the simple binary, is based on a complex historical process. The following chapter is a brief introduce to history of China's urban-rural relationship.

2.1 In traditional Chinese society

In China, the earliest urbanism emerged no later than the Longshan-Era, which is often indicated as the beginning of Chinese civilization. Archeologists found dozens of walled cities with residential units, religious units, workshops, bronze foundries, and water wells(Demattè, 1999). In this process of differentiating different social classes, some spatial areas are treated differently from the extensive farming area outside these walled settlements.

Although the rural-urban distinctions appeared quite early, both areas were relying on each other with no distinct division of labor or opposition. Liu Shiji 刘石吉 writes that cities are nodes of the empire's administrative system. With this administrative city-urban network, the government can rule vast rural areas. (Liu Shiji 刘石吉, 2008) . In addition to political functions, scholars also consider the economy as a crucial part of the rural-

urban relationship. Li Zi 李孜 believes that in traditional Chinese society, the comprehensive policy including land policy, tax policy, and civil control system promoted the spontaneous emergence of small towns and the development of commercial networks with markets as centers(Li, 2019, p. 52) In this model, he mapped China economy in a network of vast agricultural land and a small number of connected commercial centers.

2.2 After the 19th century

Cities and countries are believed to be interdependent in ancient China. The city-countryside differentiation people see nowadays, or the spatial difference between industrial (or non-agricultural) area and rural parts, is a kind of binary opposition that only appeared in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Modernization brought the dichotomy between urban and rural. Liu Shiji suggested that the concept of rural-urban dichotomy is based on the characteristics of the “new city” after the Western Industrial Revolution. In Chinese history, it was only in the second half of the 19th century when the modern commercial port system was established, that emerged cities that represented the opposition of agricultural sectors (Liu Shiji 刘石吉, 2008) . Since the 19th century, China's rural urbanization has changed the traditional harmonious relationship between urban and rural areas. China's urban-rural relationship has undergone a rapid and comprehensive transforming process, including population, spatial forms, functions, ideology, and culture. Since then, the city and the countryside have gradually become a distinct contradiction. (Zhang Yiping 张一平, 2019)

2.3 After 1949: the *hukou* system

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC), this rural-urban contradiction was inherited, and the tensions were not alleviated, but rather amplified by China's household register system, the hukou (户口) system. The household register was a system implemented in China since imperial times. Following this tradition, both the Republic of China (ROC) and the PRC established a national register system immediately after the founding of their rule (Wang, 2005). However, the *hukou* system in PRC after 1958 went far beyond citizen registration, cementing citizen's status as either rural or urban, and hence, the opposition between urban and rural areas became even more pronounced. *Hukou* registration not only provided the principal basis for establishing identity, citizenship, and proof of some official status, it was essential for every aspect of daily life (Cheng & Selden, 1994, p. 644) . Taxes, welfare policies, the job market, and resource allocation are all closely related to the *hukou* system. Blocking the flow of population between urban and rural areas is one of the main focuses of the *hukou* system, and the isolation and differentiation between urban and rural regions later became the essential feature of the *hukou* system.

In the literature, the *hukou* system is regarded as an unavoidable choice to allocate the population in China's heavy-industry-oriented development strategy influenced by the Soviet Union. Zhang Yiping pointed out that with the establishment of the planned economy in China after 1953, China's dual urban-rural structure gradually took shape. However, due to the failure of the "Great Leap Forward" and the natural disasters started in the late 1950s, the population flow between the urban and rural areas was immediately

seen as a risk and interfered (Zhang Yiping 张一平, 2019). In the late 1950s, as China faced the false prosperity of industries and the reduction of agricultural output, large numbers of migrants left their farmlands flooding into the urban areas. The migrants are named as "blind floaters" (*mangliu* 盲流) because the large influx of incomers are considered as not having a clear plan when relocating. In the 1950s, the government wanted to turn the *mangliu* population into city workers locally. However, by the 1960s, it repatriated the majority of *mangliu* back to their original places of residence (Guo Shutian & Liu Chunbin, 1990). Chan Kam Wing and Zhang Li (Chan & Zhang, 1999) wrote that China's resource endowments, at that time, were characterized as capital-scarce but labor-abundant. China's heavy-industry-based industrialization cannot convert a large farmer population into workers. Thus, the government chose to block free flows of labor. Under this perspective, the *hukou* system has served the function of migration control.

With the new regulations, a sharp distinction emerged. Cities are considered industrial and administrated directly by the state. In contrast, rural areas are considered agricultural, self-sufficient, and under the management of residences' collective power¹. "Urban areas are essentially owned and administered by the state, and their residents are the state's direct responsibility. The state budget must supply urban areas with employment, housing, food, water, sewage disposal, transportation, medical facilities, police protection, schools, and

¹ There are two related parts in *hukou* system: the residential location (*hukou suozaidi* 户口所在地) and the status of *hukou* (*hukou leibie* 户口类别). The former is a category based on one's permanent residence location (officially, only one), mostly either urban areas or rural settlements. The latter is the classification of ones' occupation status, either agricultural or non-agricultural. The detailed regulations for urban and rural residents are generally based on *hukou leibie* rather than *hukou suozaidi*. However, despite the presence of urban agricultural population and rural non-agricultural population, most of the time these two categories are highly correlated.

other essentials and amenities of life" (Banister, 1987, p. 328). However, in rural areas, as Yu Depeng concludes (Yu Depeng 俞德鹏, 2002, p. 112), the government does not run the society, but the society (farmers) itself runs both the society (public facilities) and the "government" instead. Farmers have to run (and pay for) their private rural primary and secondary schools, medical care, cultural celebrations, roads, and all the agricultural public facilities. Besides, in the countryside, only a limited amount of officials in the township-level (Xiang 乡) and town-level (Zhen 镇) governments can get salaries paid by finance. Chan Kam Wing and Zhang Li (Chan & Zhang, 1999) suggest that the *hukou* system acted as a domestic passport system in the Chinese society that draws a gap between different groups and amplified social segregation and disparity, producing a much stronger social dualism.

The rural-urban segregation not only formed two almost parallel societies but also imposed discrimination against the countryside with various regulations. A 2018 study (Gao & Fennell, 2018) showed that the countryside suffers the Urban bias of the central government, which means that the scarce resources are invariably allocated to the urban (or industrial) sector. The urban bias aggravates rural poverty. With all discriminative policies, especially in the centrally planned period, the price-scissors theory is consistent with the reality in China that gap between urban and rural areas is growing over time. Additionally, rural and urban residences have experienced unequal opportunities under the *hukou* system. Rural residents face higher mortality rates, worse education conditions, and the fact that agricultural productions are being transferred to cities.

Although the *hukou* system is different from the caste system in ancient India, it still shapes a discriminative hereditary identity system (Yu Depeng 俞德鹏, 2002, p. 65).

2.4 Changes in the reform era

However, the urban-rural relationship has also undergone some changes together with China's historical development. In the reform era, the original strict policy was somewhat changed, and the strong bond of the rural area, the agricultural sector, and people with "agricultural" *hukou* has been loosened.

Some discriminatory policies have changed, including the rural-urban resource allocation. cities have gradually stopped receiving food and other supplies from the countryside, and the flow of resources is now determined mainly by the market. Based on Gao and Fennell's research (Gao & Fennell, 2018, p. 29), the price-scissors theory has been a less appropriate description of China in this period.

In addition, the restrictions on migration become loosened. Wang Feiling compared the *hukou* as a "water pump" for mobility in Chinese society. It blocked the rural-to-urban migration at first but in the 30-year reform era, due to the need for labor, some compromise policies showed up allowing mobility to some extends, such as the temporary residence permit and the so-called "blue stamp *hukou*" system (Wang Feiling 王飛凌, 2008). China has been witnessing an epic scale of rural-to-urban transformation since 1980s, including both spatial movement and changes in industrial structure. The urbanites that once only accounted for about 20% of the whole population now outnumber the rural residents (chart

one).²

With this large-scale population flow, the relationship between city and rural areas is no longer simply a binary opposition. Although the gap between rural and urban areas still exists objectively, one main component of "the rural" and "the urban" have changed—the people. The city is no longer just made up of "urban people", and a large number of rural-to-urban migrants have also become residents of the city.

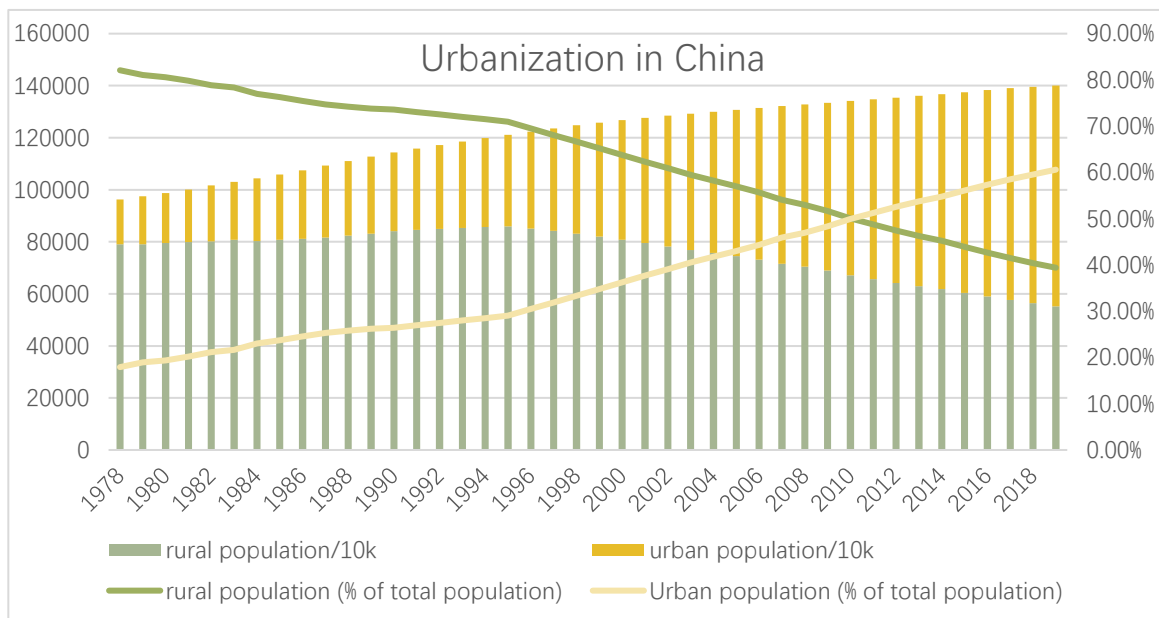


Figure1

Source: compilation based on the annual statistical communiqué of the PRC on the national economic and social development by national bureau of statistics of China

China has a set of particular terminologies for these categories (chart 2). Amid all the words, “the floating population” (流动人口 *liudong renkou*) is the closest synonym of migrants, referring to people who move away from their registered city for *hukou*. One of

² Although China does not have a census every year (the last census was the sixth census in 2010), but thanks to the *hukou* system, there is an almost accurate data on population. In this chart, the data on the urbanization come from the Ministry of Public Security and a further source is the household registration system.

the most relevant terminologies related to urbanization is *nongmingong*(农民工). This word, usually translated as migrant workers, literally means "farmer worker" in Chinese, and is defined by China's official statistical agency as "farmers who have worked outside the township for six months or more, or local farmers who have engaged in non-agricultural industry inside the township for six months or more (NBS, n.d.)". In 1983, *nongmingong* were thought to be around only 2 million, yet by 2017 there were already 286.52 million. More than half of these people have left their hometowns. It is people in this category that have gradually migrated to cities in recent decades and become urban residents.

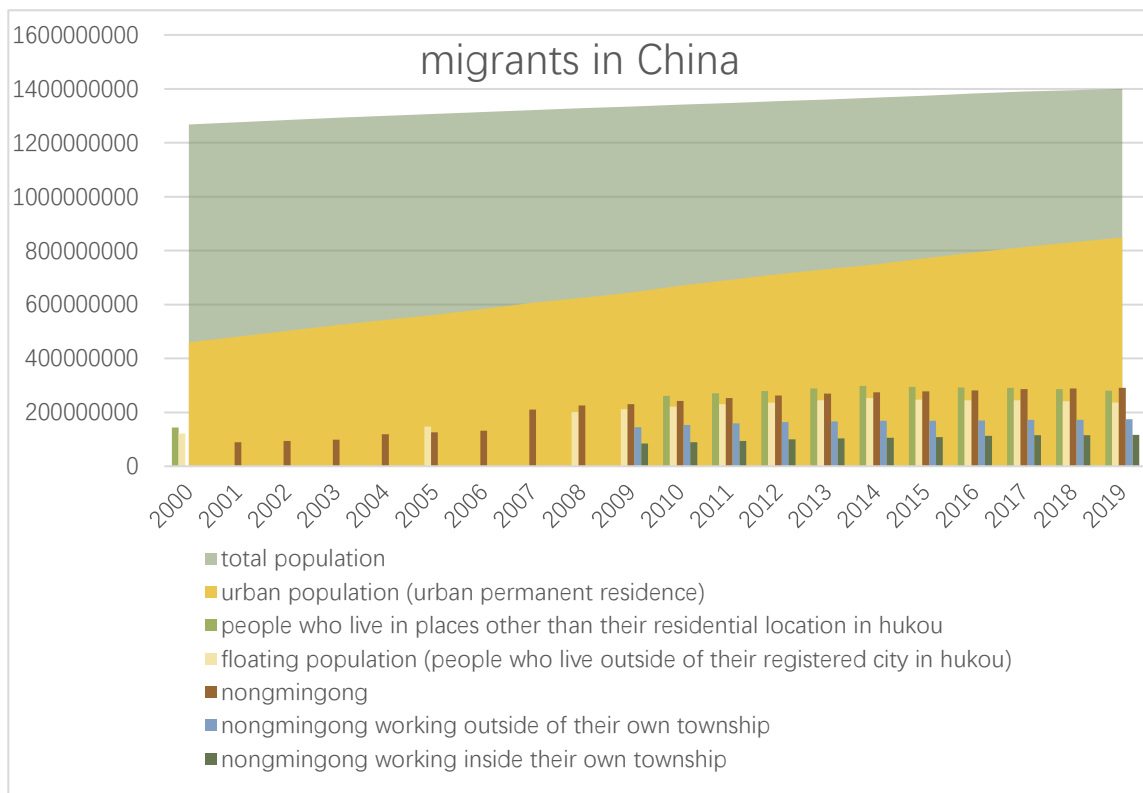


Figure2

Source: compilation based on the annual statistical communiqué of the PRC on the national economic and social development by national bureau of statistics of China

Cities are not the same as before, at the same time, the rural areas have also changed.

In addition to the large population outflow, life in the countryside no longer directly point to agricultural activities, and industrial production is also being carried out in rural areas. Some towns have, in their own way, completed the process of urbanization, while remaining as "countryside" in official statistics. Near half of the *nongmingong* are people working in non-agricultural industries in their townships. Since the early 1980s, many manufacturing towns appeared in coastal areas, which was once a town or just farmlands, but now consist of TVE factories (Township and Village Enterprises) and non-factory areas functioning like urban areas (Gong, 2018).

2.5 New policies in the 2000s

Another change of urban-rural relationship started with a set of new policies, the most notable one of which is the abolition of the agricultural tax. As Gao and Fennel summarized, in rural areas, there were three types of burdens: the taxes collected by the central government, levies and fees collected by the lower level of the governments, and various other fines and surcharges collected by the local government and organizations. While the first category was usually referred to as formal taxes, the other two were 'quasi-taxes' (Gao & Fennell, 2018, pp. 55–56). After several reforms from 2000 to 2006, the agricultural tax was abolished entirely (Xinhua News Agency, 2006), thus putting an end to the 2600-year long history of taxation on agriculture. This is undoubtedly far from no economic burden imposed on the countryside as rural residents still bear the latter two quasi-taxes. However, the hardship of farmers has been hugely reduced.

Meanwhile, the more critical part of these reforms is the change in the government's

attitude towards agriculture and the rural sector. From urban biased strategy to the policy of "industry nurturing agriculture and cities supporting rural areas" (工业反哺农业、城市支持农村), the urban-rural relationship has significantly evolved in China (Westlund et al., 2010) .

2.6 Conclusion

In conclusion, China's urban-rural relations have gradually developed into antagonism since the beginning of industrialization. After the establishment of PRC, the hukou system that distinguishes urban and rural areas has deepened this antagonism. Cities and villages have entered different life trajectories. People in the countryside can hardly move to the cities and have to suffer various discriminations. The subsequent reforms after the 1980s pointed to other potential results. With the loosening of travel restrictions, a large number of rural people have left the farmlands, although the hukou system still prevented them from becoming immediate urbanites. Many Chinese rural areas also have their industries and have gained the characteristics of urban areas. Then after 2000, China's policy of sacrificing rural regions to develop cities since the founding of PRC has ushered in a turning point. Presently, the influence of urban-rural segregation continues. Nevertheless, cities and countryside are no longer two parallel worlds as in the past, but more inclined to present a state of integration.

3. The internet in China

The internet, also referred to as the virtual world, brings people opportunities different from what we have in the real world. From a utopian perspective, urban-rural relations no longer seem to be a problem. Just as Humphreys indicated in his book *the qualified self*, social media has provided a new stage for people to perform their identity. The potential audience is naturally only see allowed to see specifically performed sides of people (Humphreys, 2018). Urban or rural has become a pair of identity tags that people can choose to present or not, rather than having to be restricted and managed as in the real world. But from another perspective, the Internet may also widen the gap between rich and poor regions as it is obviously easier to build network infrastructure in densely populated cities. It is impossible to have complicated knowledge about the rural content on the Internet without understanding the Chinese network infrastructure situations and the culture on the Chinese network.

3.1 The netizens in China

China, as well as most of the globe, had a rapid growth of the user population of the internet, also known as netizen population, in the last decade. There are numerous statistics supporting how great the Chinese internet coverage is now. Mega data platform iResearch said that in March 2020, there were 904million online devices in China(*iResearch Homepage*, n.d.). China's most popular instant messaging software WeChat announced that its Monthly Active User (MAU) is up to 1,151 million accounts(Weixin pai 微信派, 2020). According to a statistics report from MIIT (Ministry of Industry and Information

Technology of China), the total number of mobile phones in China reached 1.57 billion in 2018. This number is 1.112 times of China's population (Radio Administration Bureau of MIIT, 2019). With all of the beautiful numbers above, it is appropriate to indicate that after the improvement of infrastructure, most people in China are online now?

The China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC), the administrative agency responsible for Internet affairs in China, has released statistical reports on the Internet situation in China since 1997. According to its latest report (CNNIC, 2015), by the end of June 2019, China has 845 million netizens, which is lower than any of the astounding numbers above. The internet penetration rate exceeded 60% for the first time, reaching 61.2%. However, according to World Bank data, the internet penetration rate reached 60% in 2006 in Hongkong SAR and 2003 in the United States (the world bank data, n.d.).

For the 541 million people in China who are still absent on the internet in 2019, people in the urban areas accounted for 37.2%, while those in rural areas accounted for 62.8% (CNNIC, 2015, p. 15). China's urban-rural imbalance has always been reflected in internet coverage. In June 2007, when CNNIC's first report on the Internet situation in rural areas was published, the number of rural netizens was only 37.41 million. Among the 737 million rural residents in rural areas, the Internet penetration rate was only 5.1%; in the same period, the number of urban netizens reached 125 million, and the Internet diffusion rate was 21.6%.

China's overall Internet penetration has risen gradually. However, the proportion of rural and urban areas seems to have remained unchanged: the percentage of rural netizens in the total netizens is around 25%. In the CNNIC report, the government emphasizes quite often the significance of rural internet infrastructure and the determination to bridge the digital divide. Nonetheless, the percentage of rural netizens in China's netizen population has not changed. Perhaps optimists would argue that, with some effort, at least the price-scissor effect does not show on internet coverage. For pessimists, this may point to a horrible reality that the voice of urban areas has an overwhelming advantage on the internet, and this situation will continue. Neither of these speculations, notwithstanding, fully considers China's urbanization process.

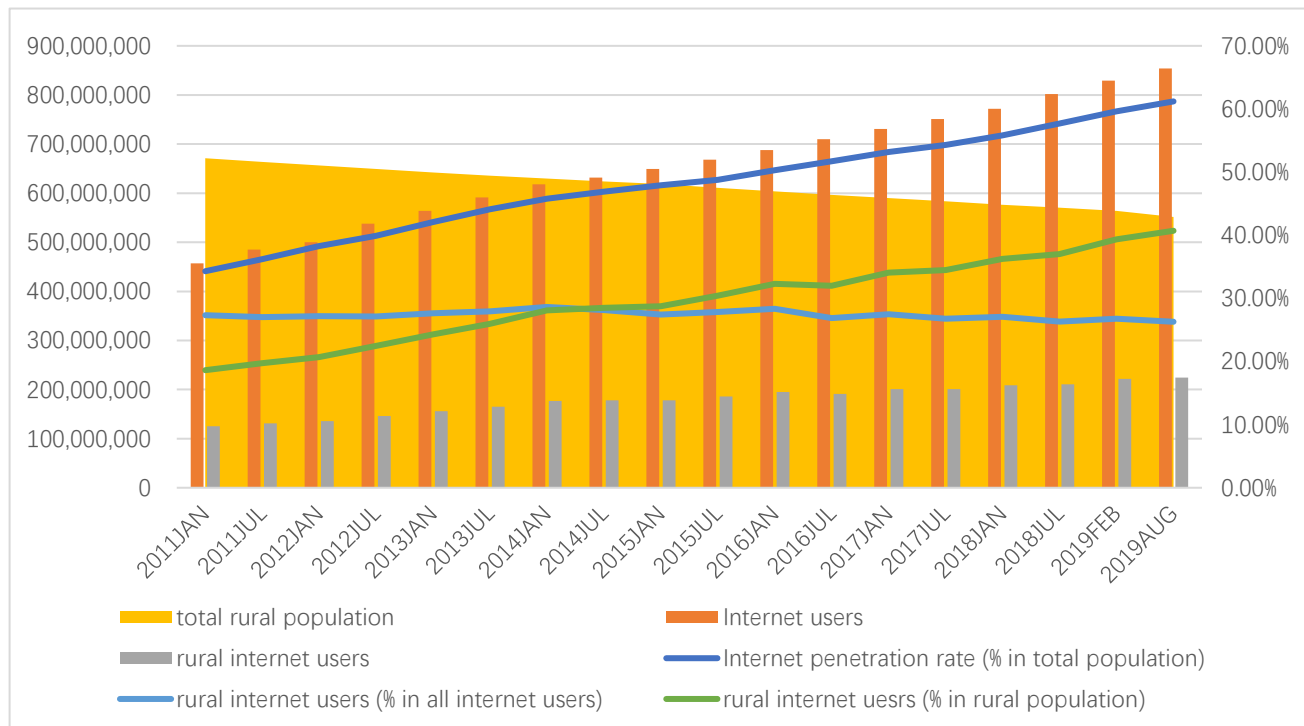


Figure3

Source: compilation based on the six-monthly internet development statistical report by CNNIC

In CNNIC data, a subtle ambiguity about urban and rural areas is the definition of these two categories. In the 2007 report on the rural internet situation, the description of rural netizens was "people who live in the countryside for four days or more per week" (CNNIC, 2007, p. 6). Then in 2009, these two categories were redefined as: "rural residents: Internet users who have mainly lived in rural areas in the past six months; urban residents: Internet users who have lived primarily in urban areas in the past six months (CNNIC, 2009, p. 6)". These two concepts are related to the actual place of residence, which is closer to the permanent resident population mentioned earlier, but not the *hukou* status. Farmers have been taking up about 80% of the total Chinese population for a long time, while the permanent urban residence reached 60% of the total population now. Several groups with rural backgrounds will thus become part of the urban netizen population. Some people work and reside in cities, but still only hold rural *hukou*. Some other people completed the official conversion from the agricultural population in rural areas to the non-agricultural population living in the city, with an urban *hukou*. Still, some people who live as urbanites may be recorded as rural netizens. Those from manufacturing villages that have already relied heavily on TVEs are urbanites that are not counted in official statistics. They do not engage in agriculture and live urbanized or semi-urbanized lives. However, they will be registered as rural netizens in such statistics. Under China's decades of change in the urban-rural relationship, neither the quantity nor the proportion of the rural-to-urban migrants can be ignored. Despite the differences in official registration, with a full rural background, they all are residents who have experienced or completed urbanization and are now part of

the urban lifestyle.

In 2015 when China has the highest number of *floating population*, the elderly over 65 accounted for only 0.2% of them (Migrant Population Division of NHFPC, 2015) In that year in China, there were 143.86 million people aged 65 and over, accounting for 10.5% of the total population. Therefore, the main communities involved in the migration are young people. In Zhong Funing and Xiang Jing's research on *nongmingong*, the authors indicate that the migration of a part of a household or only the labor force in rural areas is far higher than the migration of the entire family. This phenomenon significantly changes the age and gender structure of the rural regions. The resident population in rural areas is obviously "aging, feminizing, and childlike." From the age of 16, rural people tend to migrate to the city, and only 40% of rural residents around the age of 30 live at home for three months or more each year (Zhong Funing 钟甫宁 & Xiang Jing 向晶, 2013). Meanwhile, internet users in China were mainly young. People age 10-39 accounted for 75.1% of the total netizens and the elderly over 60 only accounted for 3.9%. As it is a true phenomenon that the elderly are less likely to use the internet, this intergenerational difference in the floating population makes it more difficult to spread the internet in rural areas than it could be.

China's internet coverage is going up, but it is still worse than many developed regions, with most people who yet do not have internet access from rural areas. The proportion of rural netizens in China has maintained at a relatively low stable value for years. Rural areas are now crowded with people who are hard to reach by the internet because of their age

and literacy level. However, under the premise that the rural population is gradually decreasing and people who are more likely to use the internet are in the group that tends to migrate away, it is still a good result that the proportion of rural netizens has not declined. More importantly, those migrants who have left the countryside, although they have become urban netizens in statistics, they know the countryside. If they want, they can show their rural identity online.

3.2 The devices

In the early days when Chinese people first connected to the internet, only university students and relatively wealthy individuals had the opportunity to use it. But then in the early 2000s, some alternative devices other than PC put more people on the edge of access to the internet.

Qiu's 2009 book *Working class network society* is one of the earliest studies on the Chinese internet environment in the English world. He proposed the term "information have-less" to describe groups who do not have privileges to use the Internet in the most convenient way. Most of the information have-less are relatively poorer and less educated people. He detailed classified Internet cafés in China into several categories with different characteristics. One tier that is cheaper had given have-less people affordable opportunities to rent desktops. Likewise, another device called *xiaolingtong* (小灵通), which is a mobile phone with limited functions, also provided cheap internet access for people outside of the elite (Qiu, 2009). This kind of place that provides cheap internet access for low-income groups is not unique to China. For example, Burrell also introduced how the internet in

Ghana, which was once limited to the elite, was extended to nonelite, marginally employed young people through the relatively accessible café space (Burrell, 2012).

Qiu's book published in 2009 was based on his 2004 research, which is now more than 15 years ago. At that time, Internet cafés as an alternative means of internet access for relatively poor groups accounted for a large part of the Chinese internet environment. However, these cafés have been used by only about 150 million people for ten years, and in 2019 used by 19% of the total netizen population. Besides, in 2004, the Chinese netizen population was less than 100 million. Anyone with access to the internet at that time is now people who have used the Internet for 15 years and hard to be considered as have-less. Information have-less is a relative and developing concept. In a sense, this is like the concept of barbarians in imperial China. Barbarian is a corollary opposition to the 'central state' rather than a fixed racial group or special area. And when the state is expanded beyond old borders, entirely new peoples on still farther peripheries will be accounted into this category (Fiskesjö, 1999). For internet accessibility, information have-less is also relative to the boundary of the so-called privileged groups. Once working-class people were thought to be standing on the edge of this classification, but now this new edge may be among the uneducated older people, mostly from the rural areas.

The boundaries of internets are not spatial, but infrastructure related. People access the Internet through different devices. And this boundary is often mapped by the relatively cheapest means of access.

In China, smartphones are the cheapest Internet devices. Considering the user side,

although people can definitely choose very expensive models, cheap phones can also get people online. Xiaomi, which was often called the "value champion" because of its cheap and proper performance, still has a smartphone that only costs 699 yuan (about \$ 100) today, which is still not the cheapest smartphone. Some less-famous brands and the second-hand market provides people with phones at an extremely low price. Although this is definitely more expensive than renting a computer for several hours in an Internet café, it is still affordable for many. For the infrastructure on a broader perspective, mobile signals have now covered most places with residents. According to data from the MIIT, 98% of China's administrative villages have access to optical fiber and 4G networks. It is still impossible for people to use the Internet anytime, anywhere in China, the urban bias of infrastructure still lays the edge of internet accessibility in remote areas. The internet has better coverage and faster speed in places of the higher density of people, such as cities. During the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, when most people have to work from home, there are people in remote countryside climbing on the top of the roof or other places near the signal tower for better signals (Xinmin Evening Post, 2020). Now on the user side, this kind of cheapest Internet access device is roughly affordable for everyone, and in terms of infrastructure, most people can get basic protection, and the frontier of internet boundary has been expanded to the remote spatial areas.

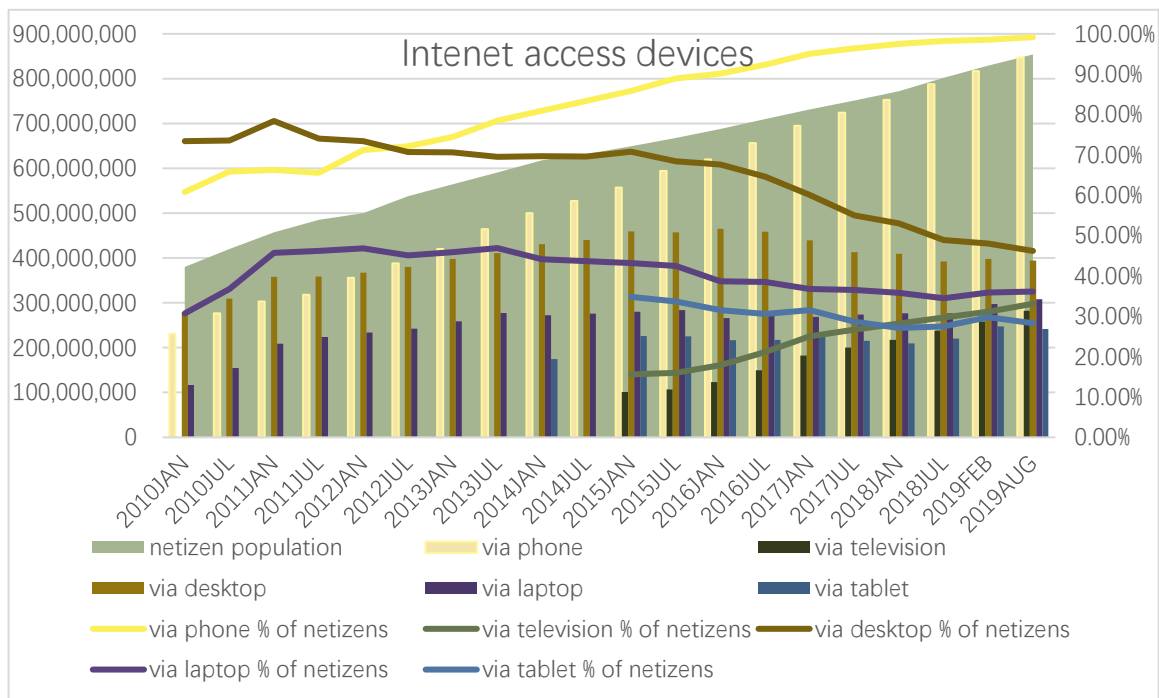


Figure3

Source: compilation based on the six-monthly internet development statistical report by CNNIC

All the devices listed above are referring to “used at least once in the last have a year”.

More importantly, smartphones not only lowered the thresholds for access, but they are also the most mainstream Internet access devices. According to CNNIC data (CNNIC, 1997), in the first half of 2014, for the first, the number of people who had used a smartphone to access the Internet exceeded the total number of netizens using desktops and laptops. Now in China, it has been more than three years that more than 95% of the netizens are smartphone users. In iResearch’s annual report of internet, netizens spend twice as much time on mobile devices than traditional PCs without geographical differences(iResearch, 2020).

The digital divide does not vanish magically, but the situation is getting better.

Although richer people may have multiple alternative devices to access the internet, such as personal computers, televisions, and tablets, the common dependence on mobile phones has accommodated the vast majority of netizens in the same network environment. There is almost no gap between urban and rural areas in the use of smartphones as the primary device to access the Internet.

3.3 Chinese internet environment now

I recently watched a video called “Most Popular Instant Messengers 1997 - 2019” last year, which is a figured timeline history of the world's most popular instant messenger apps measured their MAU number. In this video, QQ leads the whole rank for most of the time, and finally “defeated” by WhatsApp in 2015 (Data Is Beautiful, 2019). It did not surprise me, but the comments did.

Most majority of the comments are in English, and most of the jokes expressing the lack of understanding of existence and history of QQ have received many likes.³ QQ is just the tip of the iceberg. The English-speaking world and the simplified Chinese online environment, especially in mainland China have not perfectly united. For many westerners, Chinese netizens seem to live in a different online environment.

3.3.1 The general environment now

³ There top few comments were:

“Today, I learned that if something is huge on the internet and you've never heard of it, it's probably because it's Chinese” by Mr Lks, with more than ten thousand likes.

“Leave a like if you never heard of QQ.” by Five's, with more than 70 thousand likes and hundreds of comments saying that they know QQ.

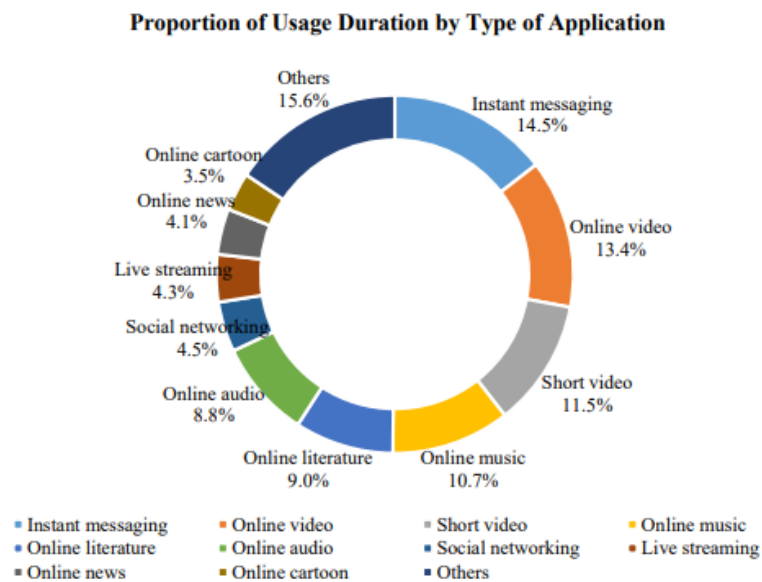
” - QQ: ‘Hey, there was a time I had almost 900 million users.’ - Me: ‘Never heard of you.’” By Yago Coca
And “QQ: You took everything from me. WhatsApp: I don't even know who you are.” by Pavan Kumar

The easiest way to introduce the Chinese online environment may be naming Chinese popular platforms as the Chinese version of another platform. People may describe Youku as China's YouTube or HULU (Josh, 2019), and Weibo being China's twitter or Instagram (Ren, 2018). This is a convenient but arbitrary way. Because of the similarities shared by platforms in a specific type and the history of imitations by Chinese Internet companies, this comparison is sometimes effective. But the simple equivalence hides the subtle differences between platforms and leads people to mistakenly think that different platforms share the same situation.

Copycat, this is many people's first impression of many Chinese platforms. For example, the relationship between QQ and OICQ is the imitator and the original, so as Renren and Facebook, Weibo and Twitter, Youku and YouTube, etc. The initial idea of many Chinese Internet companies is to imitate existing business ideas to develop their platforms in the Chinese world. This is a real history but not the whole story. After the initial imitation, companies make different changes from their original in the process of interacting with users and the government. It's companies, government, and local users together that have shaped this history. The understanding of similar platforms can be used; for example, Chinese social media also conforms to the typical characteristics of other social media, such as interactivity, media convergence, and temporality (Baym, 2010, pp. 1–23). People's utilize of social media is also similar. A Youtuber may promote the related Instagram account while Chinese influencer may promote their Weibo and WeChat official accounts on their Bilibili and iXigua videos. However, the specific Chinese online

platforms cannot correspond to other platforms one by one. A general understanding of how Chinese people use all kinds of platforms is more effective than this correspondence.

In 2015, instant messaging and the traditional social media took up 48% of netizens' online time, while only 22% of their time was spent on audio or videos (CNNIC, 2015). However, in 2019, the ratio absolutely changed. Netizens spend 49% of their online time on long videos, short videos, music, and online audios, and only 19% of their time on instant messaging and traditional social media. 88.8% of netizens use video platforms. This percentage exceeds those using search engines, which account for 81.3% of the total netizens.



(Figure 4, cited from(CNNIC, 2015, p. 17))

Interestingly, the vast majority of video and music platforms are algorithm feeding media. In a 2019 New York Times post, TikTok is considered as revolutionary for social media. It designs force the users to read the feeding content generated by the algorithms

when traditional social media still highly rely on the feeding content from people actively followed (Herrman, 2019). This is somehow an over reputation for TikTok since it is not the first company to be confident with their algorithm. Google started to offer filtered results years before TikTok (Pariser, 2012). When people open the YouTube phone application, all the videos on the homepage are selected by the algorithm.

Albeit the timeline, the success of ByteDance—the parent company of TikTok—and the decline of China's largest Bulletin Board System platform—Baidu Tieba—were a landmark event. In an era when algorithmic feeding occupies most of the people's time, in the ocean of information, instead of selecting all information about a topic, people are more easily to only attracted by a certain interesting point. Although different platforms have their unique algorithms, all platforms are committed to pushing content and advertisements that users may be interested in. For the content receivers, people used to discuss the chamber effect more about political positions, but under the algorithms, it went further than politics. Things that people are interested in will also be strengthened over and over again, and things people have not known yet may never be shown on the homepage. Meanwhile, for the content producers, in addition to maintaining the continuity of their different videos for maintaining their followers, they inevitably need to consider more about how single videoclip can be widespread, or more specifically, widely pushed to larger audiences by the algorithms. The limitation of the algorithm automation may extend to all possible aspects. It is of course possible for people to discover topics that they have never expected, but those topics that can resonate widely will obviously have advantage in

spreading. Regarding the urban-rural relations, how many urbanites who have never watched anything about food cultivation can get a feed of specific fertilization skills on their homepage? Maybe, no.

3.3.2 The influencers and the platforms

Most of the content producers are now on multi-platform, which means that they need to invest their energy on dozens of platforms at the same time. Most often, an influencer's account set contains at least one social media for textual information, normally Weibo, Wechat official account, Toutiao article, Douban, Qzone, or Zhihu. Meanwhile, they have to be on every platform of video, namely TikTok, Kuaishou, Huoshan, iXigua, Bilibili, Youku, and YouTube. For the former, they can win more popularity as information circulated. For the latter, if they do not appear on all platforms, there will be others occupying their name and impersonating them for the profit. The platform listed above is still not all the places where multi-platform authors are expected to appear. Some bloggers need to show themselves in some professional communities. For example, cooking bloggers are frequently updated on recipe social media, while technical bloggers need to continually publish articles in the technical community to maintain their presence.

This amount is not an exaggeration. Notably, there are many ways to name the job “content producer.” Such as KOL (key opinion leader), wanghong (网红 online celebrity), author, content creator, influencer, blogger (博主), dazhu (答主 respondent), UP 主 (uploader), douzhu (抖主 TikToker), etc. As many platforms have their own terms for people who publish content, many people who are on multiple platforms can only call

themselves bloggers or influencers. These general terms are neither specific nor arrogant.

Operating these accounts is an invisible labor force. As the difference in people's mastery of technology is also part of the digital divide. Those who cannot use technicians efficiently to deal with feedback from more than a dozen platforms are more vulnerable than those who are capable of. Many people need to sign a multi-channel network (MCN) to assist their operations. However, holding dozens of accounts does not point to the success on every platform. In the following article, I will only introduce the performance of a particular blogger on he/she most successful platforms.

For all the topics about China's network, the Great Fire-Wall (GFW) and censorship are the topics that many people outside China care about most. People may be curious about why a YouTube account is semi-obligatory for the influencers when this platform is blocked. Indeed, there are many ways for people to bypass this invisible wall. Individuals can get information outside the GFW, but not everyone is able or willing to pay the labor of "learning to bypass the GFW." Thus, the most blocked platforms can hardly form an influential mainland Chinese user community⁴. However, for the bloggers, a YouTube account has a close relation to their income, so this labor is what people willing to pay.

⁴ Pornographic platforms are the most notable exception, since there is no alternative platform inside the GFW.

4. Rural influencers

In this environment of the Chinese Internet, people witness more and more content with noticeable rural marks emerging. A large part of the content producers have become very powerful influencers, and many of their works go viral. In the following section, I will give a detailed interpretation of some typical examples, to understand where these influencers come from, how they demonstrate the countryside lifestyle, and what kind of relationship they establish with the audience.

4.1 Li Ziqi and the other idyllic video producers

Li Ziqi (李子柒), with the most subscribers among mainland Chinese content creators on YouTube, is the top one influencer producing rural content. She seems to live a traditional Chinese life where she can make everything she wants. She makes videos on everything people can imagine about rural life: sowing, harvesting, fishing, cooking, handcrafting, making furniture, making clothes, and even making quilts. She shows people how she lives in the countryside throughout the year. For those who like her videos, she is an omnipotent fairy and a Disney princess in real life.

She was born in a remote village in Sichuan Province. Being in desperate poverty, she became a *nongmingong* at the age of 14 when it was still illegal to work. She, thus, was born in the countryside but spent her teenage years in the city. She tried multiple occupations, including DJ and bar singer, but she finally chose to return to her hometown in the mountains in Sichuan. She uploaded her first video on the Chinese website Meipai in 2016(Li Ziqi, 1925). Now she has 9.5 million subscribers on YouTube, 24 million

followers on Weibo, and over 130 million likes on TikTok. It is almost impossible for people to talk about video authors in rural China without knowing this name.

She updates three or four times a month, and the production process maybe even slower. Some of her videos may take several months to complete. The majority of her videos are filming all the possible steps of a particular pre-industrial process with a large number of fixed lenses. While she has different themes to shoot, only her videos about cooking are relatively close to the life of ordinary people. Her most popular video on YouTube, which has been watched for more than 50 million times, is in this style. More often, her video is somehow unrealistic even for people from rural areas, such as filming "the life of cotton" from being sowed to the harvest and finally made into clothes. Some themes are more like a fairytale, such as homemade China's four treasures of study (brush, ink, paper, and inkstone), or dyeing her own dress with grape skin.

In one interview, she interpreted these styles (themes) as the subsequent effect of her childhood experience. Since life in the countryside was pretty harsh when she was a child, she had to learn so many skills to survive. Thus, she found that she knew everything about the self-sufficiency of life in the countryside (Sina 新浪, 2019) . This interpretation is a half-truth. It is true that the rural areas, as a representation of the pre-industrial era, do require the farmers to do a lot by themselves. Outside the assembly lines, people do understand more about the connection between specific products and the sources or components. However, the countryside is not fixed in the past by any time machine. People in rural areas are also using various modern devices, rather than living in a world that is

almost unplugged except for lighting. Even in history, farmers were not self-sufficient in every aspect, and different workshops took specialized work, such as making brushes, ink, inkstones, and many of the themes of her videos. It is not an exaggeration that people call her a Disney princess. She has done things in a like fairytale fashions that no one else has done.

At the end of 2019, there was even a rush of discussion about her videos on Chinese social media. People were arguing over whether her videos were false depictions of rural life, whether she enhances the western world's stereotype of China, and whether the scenes in her videos just craft an image of Chinese life in response to foreign audiences' imagination of China. It started from a Weibo post, arguing that Li Ziqi's work was a better "cultural export" of China than documentaries led by the Chinese government. This initial comment misguided the entire discussion; as a result, people focused more on the relationship between Li Ziqi and foreign audiences. However, Li Ziqi's videos are far more than the imagination of China designed only for "foreign audiences." It is a fairyland expected by all the people who like her video, domestic or international.

This display fantasy is not only about her content but also her filming techniques. She has always adjusted her video style to make her work more aesthetically enjoyable. Her first video, the one posted in Meipai, was about making peach wine. The video clip was obviously overusing filters, and the shooting was very jittery. Although she used several tags related to Chinese traditions and ancient cuisine, the only relevant scene is the display of one poem. It is reasonable that she could only make a video in relatively low quality as

a beginner in video editing. Interestingly, in her second video, although her filters and shooting skills had hardly improved, she changed her dress from a casual one to wearing a bamboo hat. Later, as her themes are more beautiful and suitable in rural areas, she moved from a room with a tiled floor to a rural house in the mountains. All of her videos now are very poetic and delicate. Every frame of her video is similar to a shot in real movies. In her videos, there are some transition clips used in actual movies, filming the idyllic countryside. She often uses fixed lenses and puts herself in a distant view rather than a close-up view. Although this stemmed from her initial embarrassment when she didn't have a photographer, she retained this composition because it is similar to a movie shot.



(picture 1: a screenshot from Li Ziqi's most popular video on YouTube that has been watched for more than 50 million times by March 2020(Li Ziqi, 2019))

She hardly speaks in her videos. She may not intentionally choose to mute herself for internationalization, although it does help her to reach more audiences internationally. The more reasonable explanation is that the narration voice is not suitable for the scene. The

conversations left in her final cut are mostly with her grandma in dialect, which is incomprehensible even to most of her Chinese audience. Without narration voices, she uses some text in the video to explain what she is doing. Similarly, these words are also the first to meet the requirements of this scene aesthetically.

She also explained in the interview mentioned before that her daily life and video filming are in two states. She often films a shot many times until she is satisfied, especially before she hired a photographer. It is usual for her to repeat the scenes she needs in front of the camera over and over again (Sina 新浪, 2019). With the performing and editing her video is distinctly different from the commonly defined authenticity. She does live in the countryside, but the first requirement of the videos she films is beauty.

She stands on the connecting point of rural and urban with the experience as a *nongmingong*. She knows both the city and the countryside well and has formed a schema containing elements from both sides. Her urban history trained her with pop culture and the sense of aesthetics, especially when she was a DJ and bar singer; her rural background gave her skills and a database of themes that she can choose from. What she completes to some extent is a utopian imagination of people about rural pastoral life. Her video undoubtedly shows life in the rural area, but an artificial version. Compared to a sense of the rural, a utopian feeling is a more critical factor in her videos. Being almost omnipotent in her videos, creating a pre-industrial dreamlife that is inaccessible for everyone else, she deserves the reputation of fairy or a Disney princess. At the same time of being a Disney princess, she is also the Disney studio that works hard to present the dreamland to her

audiences. She used an elegant set of photography and editing techniques to display this fairyland most satisfactorily.

Besides, people's desired life is not necessarily related to agriculture. There are many other "Li Ziqi" performing their own fascinating fairyland in their own ways, from travel vlogs to Instagram influencers' beautiful edited pictures. Li Ziqi's world is a rural one, as the component of her story: the relaxed and soothing atmosphere, the gorgeous intact scenery, and the fantasy of self-sufficiency in the pre-industrial world are all closer to and more suitable for rural areas than cities.

Li Ziqi is the most successful blogger producing rural content, but not the only one. There are countless accounts that have a style similar to her or directly imitate her.

Dianxi Xiaoge (滇西小哥 Mr. Western Yunnan)⁵ is one case. She graduated in Sichuan Police college in 2012 and became a policewoman, but returned Baoshan, Yunnan, to take care of her family after one of her parents being in emergency medical condition. She wanted to find a job in her hometown, so it would be easier to take care of her family. she began from the e-commerce industry, and after uploading some cooking videos of Yunnan dishes, she signed the most famous MCN in China, Papitube, and became a professional influencer (Taobao Foodie 淘宝吃货, 2020).

Her videos are pretty similar to Li Ziqi's in regards to the techniques of filming and

⁵ She uses Dianxi Xiaoge as user name on almost all platforms, which could be easily interpreted as a male. She is a biological woman, and shows femininity in all her videos. She once said in an interview that she chose this name because she was ridiculed as with too much masculinity when she was in the police college (Taobao Foodie 淘宝吃货, 2020). However, there is no evidence showing that she seriously has the identity as a male. Therefore, I choose to use she/her/hers here.(Li Ziqi, 2019)

editing: fixed angles, close-up view only on ingredients, distant view of local scenery, soothing backtracks with the natural white noise, and dialogues in dialects. However, her content is much less ambitious than Li Ziqi's. She mostly only films how she makes existing Yunnan dishes within the mountains.

Those who prefer her videos to Li Ziqi's ones always consider that her videos show more authenticity and represent real life in the countryside. Although there are indeed more farmers who can cook like Dianxi Xiaoge than who can complete some epic pieces of craft like Li Ziqi, their works are both meticulously edited video clips with pre-decided plots. Authenticity is pretty subtle in people's worship of idyllic pastoral life. When the rural area is placed in this context, it has to be semi-alienated and thus can be separated from all the hardship. The authenticity is more a unilateral definition from fans, a collective imagination from people who may not necessarily understand the current life in the countryside.

The paradox of ancient towns may be a parallel example. According to a survey in 2017, the most popular tourist attraction for urban white-collar youth is the ancient towns that 32.0% of those surveyed are fascinated with. They hope to get rid of the bustling life in cities and touch the simplest folklife in those towns (Jiang Zichen 姜子尘, 2017). However, with such an enormous tourist population, people are generally disappointed with the ancient town. There is a widely-recognized comment on the ancient town: "I will regret if I do not visit, and I will regret more after visiting." Each house in the town is either a restaurant, a hotel, or a store – many are chain stores or selling cheap products in a similar design.

However, one ancient town, Wuzhen, is somewhat different. It wins a relatively good reputation and has a revisit rate of 40% – which is exceptionally high in the Chinese tourist market. Wuzhen is an ancient town with a history of 1300 years. It is like the perfect ancient town that people hoped for: the buildings are in a typical Yangtze River Delta style composed of black and white and wooden structures; some of the residents here have become the host of family stays, and the others continue their craftsmanship. As an ancient town with a long history, people can see the traces of history and, at the same time, recognize that this place is actively entering modern life. In the analysis of farmer guesthouses by McDonald, the sanitary conditions became a problem to drive away many tourists (Park, 2014). In Wuzhen, not only are well-equipped toilets provided, but all the infrastructure is well built. In addition to the modern bathroom, there are clean and cozy bedrooms, functional electric networks, and excellent Wifi coverage. Wuzhen has even become the home of many "surreal" things: the annual Wuzhen Theater Festival, and the World Internet Conference (*Official Site for Wuzhen* 乌镇旅游官方网站, n.d.).

Although tourists are still saying Wuzhen is very commercialized, they appreciate the life it provides as an idealized "modern town." Wuzhen has received much praise, including the continuation of the culture of the ancient town after the loss of authenticity in other ancient towns. Paradoxically, in all the ancient towns, Wuzhen is the farthest from "authenticity." Wuzhen was once described as "the world of Truman" in reality, which means everything represented here is fake (Agan 阿甘, 2019).

From the beginning of its plan, the Wuzhen government took back the property rights

of all the shops and moved out most of the residents from the ancient town. Only a few older people stayed in the town, and the other original residents can only get a particular subsidy every year. The government also established the Wuzhen Tourism Development Company to manage everything in a standard way. The people whom tourists see in Wuzhen are all the original residents who were hired back to Wuzhen. They have limited right to self-operate their stores and homestays, but they are employees only. Each store needs to submit a detailed business plan before opening, and only the shops that are regarded as meeting the "Wuzhen concept" are allowed.

The other ancient towns that were considered to be over-commercialized and lost their authenticity present a more "authentic" way of integrating ancient towns into modern life. As the government starts to promote tourism, some residents rebuild their houses into stores, and within the allowed range, they try their best to make their stores look more attractive – even if that will be called over-commercialized. Those residents who do not want this kind of life or who trust other people's abilities more tend to lend their houses to other merchants, such as chain stores.

As we can see from the differences between Wuzhen and other towns, authenticity has a diametrically opposite meaning on the tourist side and the ancient town side. The towns where tourism is relatively "free" to develop according to the wishes of local people are regarded as "over-commercialized" and perform less authenticity while artificially planned Wuzhen has become the spiritual home in people's dreams. Urban consumers need these destinations to satisfy their imaginations. If we can describe Disney land as a humanmade

fairy tale to maintain people's dream, the Chinese version of Disney land is not the entertainment park located in Shanghai, but 140 kilometers away, in Wuzhen.

When the longing for idyllic pastoral life is concentrated in online videos, things are much simpler than what ancient town tourism needs to accomplish. People have to experience all aspects of a place during their trip, but only get the information included in the final cut of a video. Ordinary people will present their aspirational selected aspect online, and the video producers can definitely demonstrate an idyllic world with their editing software.

4.2 Wang Gang and, the partially rural content producers

Wang Gang is another type of rural influencer who first uploaded non-rural videos but revealed a rural identity later. In 2017, he started to put his recipes online and then uploaded his first video to iXigua Video, a personalized recommendation video app of ByteDance. Then in the following few months, he gradually uploaded his videos to other video platforms. In two years, he receives more than 11 million followers on iXigua and 1.3 million followers on YouTube.

He is from a small village in Zigong, Sichuan Province, and became a cook in Zhuhai, Guangzhou, as a *nongmingong*. Before an unexpected occurrence that drove him back to the countryside, all his cooking tutorial videos give the audience no impression of rural areas. From his first blogpost recipe to becoming an influencer, the only style label he has attached to himself is "professional chef." According to an interview, he began to publish his content online because he was confident that he is significantly more

professional than the existing cooking tutorials (Qingke yanjiu zhongxin 清科研究中心, 2019).

Although becoming an influential blogger is the result of multiple choices and various events, his proficiency widely recognized. The most popular cooking tutorial videos before him were more of quality videos for audiovisual enjoyment than a feasible recipe. Cat's Kitchen (rishiji 日食记), one influencer that became famous in 2014, may be an example. Their videos are exquisite and well shot, with soothing background music and vlog of the pets. People appreciate these videos as artworks, similar to Li Ziqi's videos, but also know that these are never the right recipes for delicious dishes. Wang Gang, in contrast, was praised by fans as teaching people to open their own restaurants. The proficiency of his tutorials is widely recognized.

All the details he deliberately revealed in his videos also labeled him as a professional chef. There are many elements of his style that are linked to the proficiency: a chef coat, professional kitchenware made for Chinese restaurants, a presentation the main ingredients in the first scene, compact editing rhythm, detailed steps, precise explanations, and a final summary of techniques. In his videos, he always wears his white chef coat in his studio that he decorates as an ordinary Chinese restaurant kitchen. The stove he uses is also mainly designed for restaurants, which can provide much more heat than a regular oven. He also includes many technical terms used only by professional cooks in his video, such as Kuanyou (宽油 wide-surface oil, which means oil for frying) and Mingyou (明油 bright oil, the oil drizzled on the dish before serving). At the end of each video, he will summarize

all the techniques like a middle school teacher. In many cases, he teaches some dishes that only professional chefs can make.

What he showed to the audience in this period was limited to professional knowledge, which did not carry any regional characteristics of cities or the countryside. Some video producers who responded to his videos even attracted the audience with funny scenes where they imitate professional cooking as ordinary people. The most representative of these is Tieguodun Xiongdi(铁锅炖兄弟 wok-stew brothers) who use a rural pit-style hearth for cooking Wang Gang's recipes to create a sharp contrast to professional cooking.

Wang Gang showed his rural side after he became viral. In late 2018, he started filming some vlogs about his daily life, such as his trips to Macau, and occasionally returning to his hometown in the countryside. After the Yibin earthquake in December 2018, which caused some damage to his studio, he returned to the rural area for a few months. During this time, he filmed some very rural things, such as renovating the house and re-drilling the well. His vlog videos are also popular with the audience. Many people felt they liked him more because of these vlogs, as they saw another side of Wang Gang, other than only being a professional chef. As a successful blogger, Wang Gang perceived this positive feedback from the audience and uploaded more about his rural side. Two categories now appear in his videos: videos that show a professional side in his studio, and more rural videos in his hometown.

In the original studio, he used all possible symbols to show his proficiency, but in the rural videos, his performance is entirely different. He uses the rural traditional pit-style

hearth in a relatively dark room, or on the open area facing the farmland, wears a funny apron over his casual clothes, uses less oil, and appears with his uncle. He records more conversations than his lecturelike teaching and cancels the iconic technical summary part in his video. The signs of proficiency in his former videos was all abandoned in the rural ones. Besides the features he abandoned, what he added to his video— his uncle— is a perfect rural label for his videos. According to his videos, his uncle is a butcher who slaughtered pigs in the countryside. With this occupation, he definitely possesses much expertise out of touch with many viewers, which is consistent with the proficiency in Wang Gang's videos. Coincidentally, he has an appearance that is perfectly suitable for these videos, because he looks like “the beast”, a strong kung fu master, in the comedy film *Kung Fu Hustle*. His appearance is quite impressive for viewers in Chinese culture and implies strong hidden abilities. In short, he is quite rural. When Wang Gang speaks mostly standard Mandarin in his videos, his uncle speaks only in the Zigong dialect. After gaining recognition for his proficiency, Wang Gang developed this second seize to allow people to learn more about him. His relationship with the audience is still between the professional chef and unprofessional audience who are hungry for relevant knowledge.

His two shooting scenes are both in Fushun County. One is the studio in downtown Fushun county, and the other is in Zhangjiawan, a rural village 18 kilometers away from downtown Fushun. Fushun is a county-level division of the prefectural city Zigong, Sichuan Province. It contains 1.075 million people registered in the *hukou* system, of which 409,800 are non-agricultural population and 665,200 are agricultural population. 764,000

people live there in most of the year, 60% of which are in rural areas (Fushun county government 富顺县人民政府, 2019a). And among these rural populations, most of them are still local *nongmingong*, that is, people who leave the agriculture sector and work locally. The primary income for farmers are not agricultural products but wages (Fushun county government 富顺县人民政府, 2019b). Fushun county is a typical place in China that is undergoing urbanization, the border between the city and the countryside. Wang Gang's main studio is in downtown Fushun. According to his drone video clip during the COVID-19 outbreak (Chef Wang Gang, 2020), although Fushun County is at a lower level than actual cities, it has prominent urban characteristics. It may have a larger population and more modern buildings than many cities in the United States.

Wang Gang, who came from a rural village in Zigong, later went to Zhuhai, Guangdong, to learn cooking skills, and finally returned to Fushun, knowing both rural and urban societies and capable of making the quick shift between the two sides. When he wants to show the professional aspect, he stays in his studio, and when proficiency is not the first aspect he wants to perform, he returned to the countryside.



(picture2 and 3: one scene in his 2017 video, cooking lamb (Chef Wang Gang, 2017), and one scene in his 2019 video cooking pork with his uncle(Chef Wang Gang, 2019))

The success of his second series is based on the fact that he has already won a recognition for proficiency and is loved by his followers. He is showing the rural side of a professional chef, rather than just showing the agricultural content. The first group of videos he uploaded related to rural areas are about renovating his house in Zhangjiawan. With the rural-urban differences in China, urban people do not have the opportunity to

build their own homes. There are indeed many videos about building houses uploaded by rural residents. However, others who shoot the same subject are not lucky enough to get this attention. His vlogs became the most popular videos of building a house in rural China on YouTube when others could only get a few hundred views. It is because he was already famous that he was able to gain so much attention. In a 2017 article on YouTuber culture, the authors showed an example about the relationship between content creators, viewers community, and the content. The most subscribed YouTuber then PewDiePie attacked Nintendo for their YouTube cash share plan. He believed that more viewers chose to watch his video on Nintendo games, because of the content creator—him, rather than the content—Nintendo games(Craig, 2017). The situation is similar to Wang Gang's videos. His followers are not naturally interested in rural lives, but are more likely to watch the videos because of Wang Gang.

The city and countryside are a pair of geographical labels. Even if urban people may record the scenery in the countryside when they travel, they can hardly live a rural life. Wang Gang can have both the non-rural and rural content because of his perfect location on the cutting edge of urbanization. However, more often, video producers gather in larger cities. They make videos in their only field and may only show their knowledge in this field to their audience. However, a significant number of them are migrant people from rural areas and can present their hometown to the viewers if they want. The viewers thus may surprisingly find the blogger they follow has another aspect which is strongly connected to the rural areas, especially during the Spring festival period when people go back to their

hometown and reunite with their families.

4.3 Huanong Brothers, and other people as the source of meme

Huanong Brothers (华农兄弟 Chinese farmer brothers) , Liu Suliang, and Hu Yueqing, are two bamboo rat farmers from Quannan, Jiangxi Province. Liu is the video host, and Hu is responsible for the shooting, editing, and operating of their accounts. Although the income as a video blogger must be very considerable now, they still think that their most important identity is bamboo rat farmers.

Liu Suliang went to the city immediately after graduating from junior high school, like most of his peers in rural areas. He worked as a mechanic in Dongguan, Guangdong. He claims that he prefers to live in the countryside, likes to be a farmer, and never considers the long-term residing in big cities. He had a life as a *nongmingong* for many years until his child was born (Xie Mengyao 谢梦遥, 2019). He returned to the countryside, just like most other migrant workers, and began to worry about the income. In the end, he introduced the bamboo rat, a kind of food Cantonese people likes, to his village and started the bamboo rat breeding industry. For the other part, Hu Yueqing registered an iXigua account in April 2017 and shot vlogs on rural life with his middle school classmate. He believed it would be a bright future as a video blogger in the countryside. However, his classmate's family members did not think so. When his classmate left the village and became a *nongmingong* again, he met Liu Suliang.

At the beginning of their partnership, their videos were mostly about techniques and hacks in the bamboo rats feeding industry. Bamboo rats are rodents that feed on bamboo.

They are popular dishes in Guangdong and Southeast Asia, but there had not been a widely commercialized bamboo rat industry in China. Huanong Brothers addressed many problems they faced in their videos, from animal infectious diseases to feeding techniques. They shared these technologies through their camera, but those videos did not go viral.

The story changed in summer 2017. In July, ByteDance, the parent company of iXigua and TikTok, invested at least 500 million yuan (\$75 million) to support the *sannong* (三农: 农业、农村、农民 Three “rural”: agriculture, rural areas, and farmers) video producers. This on the one hand was based on commercial considerations. Because platforms like TikTok already have too large user bases in big cities, it can only use the red Sea strategy: investing relatively more for a new user and obeying the existing business rules. In contrast, in smaller cities and the rural areas are the blue ocean. Acquiring a new user costs much lower there, and the company has the opportunity to create their own business rules. The relationship with the government is another part of the story. It is one of the government's important achievements to lift the population from poverty, and these platforms are now considered good investment targets that can help solve this problem. TikTok was also working with the government in rural areas. In August, it launched a program in cooperation with local governments encouraging locals to promote their local specialties and hometown scenery. On ByteDance's platforms, there are more than 32,000 accounts producing content about rural areas (Yin Yijun, 2018).

Huanong Brothers definitely took advantage of this program, publishing a series of videos on their bamboo rats, which was called "100 reasons to eat a bamboo rat" later. They

started cooking their bamboo rats in the videos. To add humor, they would choose which rat to eat for a number of made-up reasons: heatstroke, diarrhea, depressed mood, fighting injury, gaining too little weight, or overeating that cost more money, etc. In a typical video in this series, Liu Suliang began to praise the beauty of a particular bamboo rat and explained why this rat is chosen, and then in the next shot, the bamboo rat was already slaughtered and ready for cooking.

After their explosive spread on Weibo, more people discovered and were entertained by them. They have won many fans as producers of funny videos. Since some elements in their videos are too amusing, such as the ridiculous excuses for cooking bamboo rats, the clumsy transit shot, the smiling face when announcing the death of a bamboo rat, they turned into online memes that are semi-independent to Huanong Brothers' original work. People started to make fan arts on them: fanfiction, video clips, and even a smartphone game: *Survive! Bamboo rat* (TOT game, n.d.).

They are pretty sure about which parts of their videos attract the followers, the amusing parts related to the rural lives that could generate memes, rather than the actual agriculture techniques. Huanong Brothers continued to create unique points that could circulate as memes in their videos. Later, they shot many videos on rural life, including picking wild fruits, cooking, harvesting products, fishing, grilling by the river, caring for pigs or dogs, and so on. These elements appeared as a series related to their usual videos, which are not necessarily associated with bamboo rats but are all elements of their rural lives. Liu gained the joking reputation as the local tyrant who usually "steals" agricultural

products from either his so-called brothers⁶ or the collectively owned mountains. People can immediately know that this is only a performed characteristic to amuse the audience, but the viewers enjoy the feeling of being amused by them.

Notably, they have signed the official MCN of iXigua platform as a professional influencer, and according to its policy, they have to post videos on other platforms one day later than on iXigua. However, they have 1.5 million more followers on Bilibili than on iXigua, and their relationship with fans on the former is also significantly closer than the latter. This result is consistent with why Huanong Brothers attract people—as a great source of memes. On the one hand, through the bullet comments system, all Bilibili viewers can quickly integrate into the process of creating and deepening memes. This process is similar to people creating memes in YouTube video comments but far more efficient. On the other hand, Bilibili used to be a platform about ACG content, which brings together many people who make fan arts. As a result, even though this platform changed marketing strategies to be less ACG related, it retains the community culture of making fanart and memes.

⁶ Liu's actual brother joined their video later, but mostly the word "brother" in the videos refers to the general neighbors in the village.



(picture 4: a screenshot of a video about cooking bamboo rats which have got more than 70 thousand bullet comments by March 2020. All the Chinese characters in the screenshot are bullet comments. Most comments in red are summarizing why Liu Suliang chose this one to cook; a few comments in white play on the word three, as this is the third bamboo rat he selected in a role; a few comments in white are just question marks (Huanong Brothers, 2020).

The concept of “Huanong Brothers” is not referring only to the account owned by Liu and Su, but more a developing process and a combined work of both their original videos and the memes. Huanong Brothers, filming their rural lives, have become the source of many memes, live harmoniously with them, and benefit from them. Still, the Huanong Brothers is not the single account that generates multiple memes. Many successful video accounts have memes associated with them, but most of the memes are about entertainment,

and even directly eliminate the seriousness of the theme.

Although meme is never a rural-related thing, many rural things are more likely to be funny and spread when many people online are unfamiliar with the countryside. In the first period of rural video popularity, that is, when Kuaishou began to penetrate the countryside, people watched the videos just for hunting the novelty (Huo Qiming 霍启明, 2016). The vast majority of people do not watch the videos because they like the content, but because the videos are weird. People are spreading memes and encouraging the repetition of those bizarre performances.

Besides, any element that can spread and can entertain people has the opportunity to become a meme, which is not necessarily in a friendly way. On all platforms, there are numerous memes about a man named Lao Ba (老八). He is a rural influencer who inherited the previous flattering performances. He has made a variety of disgusting foods and has even eaten feces. He contributed many new words to the Chinese Internet vocabulary, such as "homemade hamburger" (a gross sandwich containing stinky tofu and lemon), and "cheshuo" (厕所, often written as 撤硕, is a poor pronunciation of the word toilet in his dialect). When people use these words, in addition to feeling entertained, it also contains the contempt and maliciousness towards the original author.

5. Conclusion

As the internet infrastructure penetrates further and further, the digital divide seems to be bridged. People from different geographical locations have similar opportunities to utilize the technologies. The main reason why offline people do not use the internet has changed from thinking of it as unnecessary, lack of devices, and the high expense to the current age and literacy. In Li Zi's book *Online urbanization*, the author believes that with the convenience of the internet technologies, and the integration of online services system, the urban-rural isolation status in the early days has been gradually broken. The current changes seem to be both the continuation and reformation of traditional Chinese rural society (Li, 2019, p. 60). The primary victim of the digital divide in China, the rural areas, started to catch up with the urban side to some extends.

What is the rural-urban relationship now? As people believe the rural-urban segregation has ended, in which way are they reconnected? In Xie Jing's study, she claims that in the online society, neither cities nor the countryside is the same as the past. They have become nodes in the network, connected and infiltrated with each other. People can find rural things in the city and vis versa (Xie Jing 谢静, n.d.) . The urban-rural relationship will indeed never be like what was before. However, it is the people on the edge of urbanization that performs as the nodes.

Cities in China are developing into extreme urban in recent decades, while the rural areas are less and less rural than before. People leave their farmland and become *nongmingong*. The rural collective power also leaves the agriculture sectors to embrace

industry and wealth. The city and the countryside are already in the process of integration. More precisely, compared with the past, agriculture and rural areas are gradually dying out. Rural areas are inherently weak in comparison to cities, and it seems to be only more vulnerable in the future.

Provided that, rural content emerged on multiple video platforms and led the trend. Some accounts demonstrated that rural life win the likes from followers all around the world with comfortable editing techniques and fairy-tale-like content. Some other influencers who film subject that irrelevant to rural areas also occasionally post videos about rural content. Besides, a large part of Chinese memes stems from videos by rural influencers. Although people always want to debate on the authenticity of these videos, these are all rural lives recorded by people from rural areas. Rural content is now not only visible but even very influential on the Internet. These rural video producers have become well-known names, and the content they produce has become a shared culture for many people in an increasingly personalized era. They are successful in this field. Thus, what does their success mean to urban-rural relations?

Woolgar has created an interesting word “cyberbole” in his 2002 book, which is a combination of “cyber” and hyperbole. He wanted to use this word to summarize the exaggerated depiction of the capacities of cyber-technologies (Woolgar, 2002). They are the first group of rural people to present themselves regularly on the Internet and become influential. However, over-emphasis on the role of these video platform influencers in urban-rural relations is clearly a type of cyberbole. Although most of the description of

rural people is carried out by people living in cities, they are obviously not the first people to talk about rural people's own stories. Before them, writers with rural backgrounds had written about country life, and the novelist Mo Yan even won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Later, a comedy actor Zhao Benshan, with a rural background, invested in comedy TV series about rural life. This TV show is considered to be the most representative rural TV series around 2000 (Zhong Chengxiang 仲呈祥 & Zhang Xinying 张新英, 2009). It is unwise to argue that the current rural video influencers have contributed to a subversive change in rural-urban relations. Only by understanding them in the history of urban-rural relations can people see what kind of history they have created.

The majority of top rural influencers have the experience as *nongmongong*. When urban life is still considered to be better, and the restrictions on migrating between urban and rural areas are reduced, *nongmingong* is the common state of rural youth. They know both rural and urban areas. Their content thus often contains a dual understanding of the city and the countryside. Rural-related contents are not naturally attractive on video platforms, just like the corresponding urban daily life is also difficult to become a widely circulated video theme. The rural content itself needs to be combined with a utopian fantasy or to become a meme to get popularly circulated. However, their dual understanding of urban and rural lifestyles allows these rural influencers to complete such perform of rural content. Especially for the video producers who demonstrate the rural area as places in idyllic poetry, the experiences as the “other” allow them to know what is lacking in the city

lifestyle and unique in the countryside, and what kind of dream world can only be created in the country.

More importantly, this new phenomenon is not only the new content on the internet but new content for rural areas. In various TV shows depicting rural people after the 1980s, no matter whether it is directed by urban people or rural people, the part about earning a living rarely went beyond making money as a *nongmingong*. As the rural areas have obtained more opportunities, even if they still far from equal to the cities, being born in the countryside, migrating to a city, working there for decades, and finally earn a non-agriculture *hukou* is not the only promising life track for rural residents. Coming back to the rural area is now to some extent a considerable choice, especially when they want to earn their lives online.

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