

## **Research Proposal**

# **The Commercialization of Fragmented Space: The Production of Rural Space on China's Short-Video Platforms**

### **Abstract**

With the rising of China's short-video platforms, "rural internet celebrities" become an eye-catching phenomenon, whom own large subscriber bases and strong personal brands. When the rural internet celebrities record and share their life on short-video Apps, they challenge the stereotypical images of rural China shaped by the traditional media, and more importantly, activate the visibility of rural space in a public sphere. The video clips about rural China can be seen as "fragmented space" which were originally marginalized in the discussion of space and spatiality. While now the short-video platforms putting a spotlight on them, simultaneously, the production of rural space is being dragged into the incorporation of hegemony and capitalism. This brings up the issue of power relations embedded in the production of rural space. Whether the fragmented space is being constructed to improve the visibility and diversity of rural China, or to fit into the imagination of urban middle-class audiences in order to boost the clicks? In answering the questions, this research hereby contributes to existing researches on spatiality in the context of social media, exploring the dynamic power relations and business mechanism within the rural internet celebrities' multi-faced production on culture, identity and space.

*Key Words: Production of Space, Visibility, Short-Video Platform, Urban China, Internet Celebrities, Representation.*

## 1. Introduction

In China, how does media construct the image of rural areas? In both of my bachelor's thesis and Master's thesis, I tried to understand this question through the lens of a Chinese reality show named *X-Change* which exchanges the living environment of urban and rural teenagers. During my interview with the show's producer, I was told that the image of rural space has to be "impoverished but still beautiful" in order to evoke the urban audiences' sympathy. *X-Change* reflects how the traditional media constructs the rural space through a middle-class gaze. Media exposure of Chinese rural space is always associated with specific social issues, such as educational and economic backwardness (Liu, 2018). However, the way that the mainstream media represents the rural space is being challenged with the widely use of short-video platforms. Hundreds of millions of rural users empowered by the popularity of 4G data capable smart phones, are sharing their life on Apps such as Douyin and Kuaishou. In addition to the ordinary users, rural internet celebrities with millions of followers become an eye-catching phenomenon, whom are critical agents reconstructing the space of rural China in their videos.

Before rural internet celebrities getting their fame, the rural space on short-video platforms was also considered as pitiful and uncultured. In 2016, a Chinese blogger, Qiming Huo, wrote an article called *Brutal stories of the underclass: rural China in a short-video App*. Huo (2016) argues that Kuaishou as a short-video platform have attracted numerous users from rural China whom are desperate to improve their social class and status. Self-abuse, teen pregnancy, gangster and other sensitive contents (shown in Figure 1) are constantly produced by the rural users in order to boost the clicks.



**Figure 1.** The screenshots of videos published by some of the rural users in Kuaishou: a boy with obesity smoking a cigarette, a pregnant teenager, and a man eating a rat.

The article has triggered a hot debate in China, and many Chinese scholars hold a relatively pessimistic attitude. T. Liu (2018) believes that the essential rule of being popular on short-video platforms leaves the rural users with no choice, because they are judged by the numbers of “Repost, Comment and Like”. However, it turns out to elicit the negative exclusion from urban middle-class audiences, for enhancing their identity of higher social status (X. Liu & Wu, 2017). As a result, the rural culture represented in video clips either causes moral panic or be reduced to something to scoff at (N. Liu, 2018). This issue also attracts Chinese mainstream media’s attention. In April 2018, Kuaishou was temporarily removed from Android Market and App Store after being criticized by China Central Television (CCTV) in the Daily News. When the short-video App returned to the market, they came up with several poverty alleviation plans as public relation strategy, which aim at cultivating gifted rural users to be “influencers”.

While the rural internet celebrities activate the visibility of rural space in China, they are also being dragged into the process of commodification which distinguishes them from the other ordinary users. Take a Tibetan girl called Zhuomu as an example, who has 1.9 million followers in Kuaishou. She is famous for the videos about digging pine mushrooms on the snow mountains (shown in Figure 2), which has greatly boosted the sales of local agricultural products in her

hometown, a remote village in Tibet (Feng, 2019). The rural space produced by Zhuomu bridges the remote village to a huge capital market outside the mountain.



**Figure 2.** The homepage of Zhuomu and the screenshot of her video on Kuaishou.

Rural internet celebrities are also influential on Douyin<sup>1</sup>, another top short-video platform in China. Ziqi Li is a girl with 30 million followers on the App, who creates a rural space arousing the affection of nostalgia to the ancient China (shown in Figure 3). She has established her online store of food products, and the sales income exceeded 10 million CNY within the first week (“Short Video Factory”, 2018). It can be noticed that the production of rural influencers’ videos is being professionalized and systemized (N. Liu & Zhou, 2019), which involves a deep participation of MCNs<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, how should we understand the production of rural space conducted by the internet celebrities on the short-video platforms, being intertwined with the new technical capital and the complicated commercial capital?

<sup>1</sup> The international version of Douyin is known as “TikTok.” Compared to Kuaishou, the popular videos on Douyin are usually distinguished for “outstanding visual aesthetic”.

<sup>2</sup> A Multi-channel Network (MCN) is an organization that works with video platforms to offer assistance to a channel owner in areas such as “product, programming, funding, cross-promotion, partner management, digital rights management, monetization/sales, and/or audience development” in exchange for a percentage of the ad revenue from the channel.



Figure 3. The homepage of Ziqi and the screenshot of her online store on Douyin.

## 2. Literature Review

From 1960s to 1970s, humanitarian scholars started to emphasize on place and space in social science research, which is also known as Spatial Turn. Among them, Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault represent two fundamental paradigms (Hubbard & Kitchen, 2010). Lefebvre focuses on the production of space, and underlines the key role of space involving in commodity production; while Foucault engages in analyzing a model of disciplinary power which is dependent on a particular spatialization of social subjects and technologies of the self (Barnett, 1999). Many scholars re-examine and develop the theories in the context of social media.

Foucault illustrates the normalizing gaze of panopticism (the few to see and supervise the many) In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), and the unequal visibility produces self-control, which disciplines people fit into a democratic capitalist society. Mathiesen (1997) argues that Foucault fails to see how mass media functions as Synoptical (the many to see and contemplate the few), which serves decisive control functions in modern society. However, Rosen (2005) points out that social media has transferred the power relation into Omnipicon, in which the many are watching many. It can be linked to the concept of “peep culture” brought up by Niedzviecki (2009), which refers to share-all,

show-all, know-all. Accompanied by oversharing, what users really fear is the risk of losing visibility on social media (Bucher, 2011). While it also allows any of us to organize our visibility on our own terms (Dyan,2013). For example, rural users now own the subjectivity to construct their own identities and produce the rural space on short-video platforms, instead of being passively represented by the mainstream media.

Following Lefebvre's paradigm, some scholars examine how the space is produced by online interaction among the specific community. Lefebvre (1991) believes that social spaces are not material things but rather a set of social relationships both between objects and objects and people. In other words, space originates from social interaction. Through a case study on a spiritual community, Campbell (2005) points out that the internet could produce a space for online community presenting their common belief and identity. When virtual communities migrate to physical space with mobile technologies as interfaces, a "Hybrid Space" arise which is a new type of space that merges physical and digital (de Souza e Silva, 2006). A similar idea can be found in Edirisinghe et al.'s argument (2011), that networked interactive space can be seen as a 'Third Space' which is both imaginative and real, and more importantly, it is counter-hegemonic. Therefore, many communities which are marginalized by the mainstream media start to interact with each other. The fragmented space they produce which were considered trivial gains in importance in the context of technology-based platforms (T. Liu, 2015). Huafeng He (2019), vice president of Kuaishou says that the platform is empowered with the ability to connect "isolated individuals" by the technical development of artificial intelligence, as something which was invisible become visible now. The production of fragmented space raises the visibility of rural China, but we still need to combine Foucault's paradigm to grasp the power relation within the production process.

T.Liu (2015) believes that production of fragmented space in the context of social media, promotes dialogue between Lefebvre and Foucault. This project wants to join the debate following this path, by further exploring the features of fragmented space. On one hand, once the visibility of fragmented space being activated, the implication of space production in the notion of Lefebvre is enriched; on the other hand, the fragmented space is under the control of “eye of power” in the notion of Foucault, which extends the scope of spatial discipline. The internal unity of the two paradigms could be reflected on the production of rural China on short-media platforms. Surveillance from mainstream media steps in as more and more rural users gather in the Apps, hence the rural internet celebrities are packaged and promoted as a PR strategy, as a symbol to attract political and cultural capitals of the platforms.

It is also noticeable that the cultural production of rural internet celebrities mirrors the commodification of fragmented space. In the notion of Lefebvre, space includes “the production of commodity” and “the reproduction of social relations of production”; Since the latter refers to the leisure space for labors, T. Liu (2015) regards that the fragmented space derived in social media functions as “the reproduction of social relations of production”. While I will argue that the fragmented space functions as the production of commodities, too. Rural internet celebrities are not only being consumed, entertained on the short-video platforms, but also the pivotal individuals, labors of the new technology-based industry. Although they could gain positive emotional experience from fame and popularity, they still face the risk of being exploited, as the MCNs may not provide them with sufficient labor and social security in order to maximum the clicks and profits. This bring up the issue of power relations embedded in the production of rural space by the rural internet celebrities. Whether the fragmented space is being constructed to improve the visibility and

diversity of rural China, or to fit into the imagination of urban middle-class audiences in order to boost the clicks?

### **3. Research Questions**

This research will focus on the production of rural space on short-video platforms, and hereby attempts to contribute to existing researches on spatiality in the context of social media. To be more specific, it would conclude the following questions:

First, what are the characteristics of the rural space produced by rural internet celebrities in China? In particular, compared to other ordinary users, how do the rural internet celebrities improve the visibility of rural space, and empower the space with the potential to be commodified?

Second, how does the rural space on short-video platforms interact with the rural China in reality? To be more specific, how does the cyber fragmented space selectively represent and reconstruct the physical space?

Third, what are the political, cultural and technical factors impacting on the features of rural space production mentioned above? What are the characteristics of the commercial mechanism working behind the production of fragmented space, and how does it interact with the technology capital of new media platforms?

### **4. Research Methods**

This research will mainly conduct case studies based on Douyin and Kuaishou, which are the top short-video Apps in China. Douyin is considered more popular among urban users, while the videos in Kuaishou are thought to be more “rustic, countrified and even tasteless”——the opposite public image of two platforms could help us understand the power positions of rural space in different contexts.

To begin with, I will select about 60 rural internet celebrities whom videos receive ten thousand “likes” on average from the two short-video Apps. Discourse analysis will be used to unpack the hidden ideology of image construction, storytelling pattern and editing techniques of the short videos. This research will combine the analytical approaches proposed by Fairclough and Van Dijk, which not only grasps the structural details of discourse, but also emphasizes how does the discourse reflect political, economic and cultural reality.

Next, about 30 rural internet celebrities would be selected according to three criteria: their influence on followers, the recommended level of platforms and the degree of media exposure. I will investigate the process of their video production by field trips and conduct in-depth interviews with them. The representativeness of the interviewees will be classified based on the volume of their subscriber bases, gender, earning performance and so on. My work experience in Chinese new media industries will provide me with the opportunities of networking to approach potential interviewees.

Furthermore, I will visit the headquarters of Douyin and Kuaishou to conduct fieldworks, and interview the staffs from the technical department and the public relation department respectively. This research is dedicated to grasp the similarities and differences on review, distribution and business mechanism between the two short-video platforms, as well as to identify the position of rural internet celebrities on their branding strategy, in order to interpret the interaction of new media platforms and the production of rural space.

## 5. Timetable

| Time | Contents and Expected Outcomes |
|------|--------------------------------|
|------|--------------------------------|

|            |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Year One   | Revisit research proposal, conduct literature review, and prepare for fieldwork including funding.                                                                                                                                                |
| Year Two   | Complete the discourse analysis of the image construction of rural space; conduct both of the fieldworks in headquarters of Douyin and Kuaishou, and the in-depth interviews with rural internet celebrities in Beijing or other cities in China. |
| Year Three | Analyze data, writing up and finish thesis.                                                                                                                                                                                                       |

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