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# Between Roots and the Other:

Spectatorship of Rural Representations in Modernizing  
China

Lai Wei



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LAI WEI

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## ABSTRACT

*This dissertation investigates how young urban audiences in China interpret rural representations on social media, using the case of the popular Bilibili content creator Long Teng Hu Yue Long Shou Yi, a rural veterinarian whose videos captivated millions of predominantly urban Gen-Z viewers. The study is motivated by a broader question of how everyday engagements with rural-themed user-generated content (UGC) reveal and reproduce cultural inequalities in the context of China's modernization. While prior scholarship has emphasized media representations of rurality, few have empirically examined how urban audiences themselves interpret such representations. Addressing this gap, the research combines modernization theory, critical communication studies, and audience reception to situate audience interpretations within structural and cultural hierarchies.*

*Methodologically, the study employed qualitative research, drawing on semi-structured interviews with twelve urban-based followers of the creator. Thematic analysis was used to capture both cognitive and affective dimensions of audience interpretation as well as their engagement with ideological discourses.*

*Findings demonstrate that participants consistently equated rural 'backwardness' with authenticity. Yet, their interpretations revealed ambivalence: urban-origin participants often romanticized rurality as nostalgic retreat, while rural-origin participants highlighted labor and precarity. Across both groups, rural suffering was rarely politicized. Instead, it was reframed as resilience, sacrifice, or even individual deficiency, revealing a moral distance in their engagement. While participants expressed nostalgia for the communal warmth of rural life, their aspirations and definitions of a 'better life' remained anchored in urban-centered development logics. By simultaneously cherished and othered rural life, participants demonstrate how modernist ideologies are internalized both cognitively and emotionally. Their engagements reinforced rather than challenged existing urban-rural hierarchies and symbolic inequalities.*

*The dissertation contributes to media and cultural studies by showing how urban audiences' everyday encounters with rural UGC both reproduce and negotiate symbolic inequalities. It underscores the significance of affective and cognitive dimensions of media reception for understanding cultural inequality in contemporary China.*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2023, while sitting in my apartment in Beijing, I came across a video on Bilibili by ‘Long Teng Hu Yue Long Shou Yi’. The main character is a rural veterinarian in Heilongjiang, whose daily visits unfold alongside images of courtyards, farmland, livestock, and the everyday lives of peasants. To my surprise, I was captivated and soon realized that millions of other viewers felt the same. Within six months, the account had attracted over a million followers on Bilibili, an urban, youth-dominated platform. Its rapid success revealed a striking fact: rural-themed user-generated content (UGC) could resonate powerfully with urban youth, challenging long-standing assumptions that grassroots cultural production holds little appeal for the urban middle class.

Critical communication scholarship has emphasized how disadvantaged voices are marginalized in the public sphere. When they gain visibility, it is often by adapting to middle-class tastes through ‘self-mediation’ or ‘sanitization’, sometimes at the cost of authenticity (Chen & Li, 2020). From the Birmingham School’s analysis of subcultures to Bourdieu’s theory of distinction, these traditions highlight enduring cultural boundaries. Against this background, the popularity of a rural veterinarian’s videos among urban Gen-Z audiences raises a central question: how do audiences engage with rural representations, and what does this reveal about cultural hierarchies in contemporary China?

This question is not only academic but also personal. Despite living in Beijing, my upbringing was shaped by ties to rural Shanxi, where my family has been rooted for centuries. My father left the village in the reform era, and I moved to Beijing at ten. Over time, those ties weakened, yet when I watched these videos, images of rural life retriggered familiarity and belonging. My experience echoes millions of families whose migration mirrors China’s modernization: while the rural has been structurally marginalized (Luo & Wen, 2014), it remains an emotional and cultural homeland (Fei *et al.*, 1992).

Urbanization has intensified *xiang chou* (rural nostalgia), making rural landscapes symbolic sites of cultural anxiety (Zhao, 2015). The state’s Rural Revitalization Strategy sought to address these imbalances, positioning the rural as both a site of economic development and

cultural heritage. In this context, rural-themed UGC has reemerged as a central cultural symbol, appealing not only to rural viewers but also to urban youth.

These dynamics foreground the concern of this dissertation: audience engagements with rural representations are not neutral acts of 'liking' or 'following'. They reflect negotiations of cultural distance shaped by personal experience, social background, and the structural positioning of the rural in China's modernization process. Examining how urban audiences see rural UGC thus provides a lens into how cultural inequalities and hierarchies are reproduced in interpretations, imaginations, and emotional orientations in everyday life.

My motivation for this project stems from my own encounters with rural representations, yet these experiences also provide a broader entry point into how the rural functions as a key lens for understanding social transformation in China (Zhao, 2010). Although seemingly mundane, engagement with rural content on social media reveals how modernization generates not only material inequalities but also symbolic hierarchies and cultural distance, mediated through interpretation and emotional orientations.

To address this, the dissertation combines modernization theory, critical communication studies, and audience reception. It situates modernization as both a structural mechanism of inequality and a cultural discourse and examines how audience interpretations reveal emotional negotiations from nostalgic attachment to cultural distance.

This dissertation understands the phenomenon through a three-level analytical framework: the macro-level, where modernization discourses construct hierarchies of legitimacy; the meso-level, where media representations encode these hierarchies into cultural forms; and the micro-level, where audiences interpret, negotiate, and reproduce them in everyday practice. By tracing these intersections, this study examines how urban audiences interpret and emotionally engage with rural representations, and how such interpretations are shaped by, and in turn reproduce or contest, broader ideological structures.

This dissertation employs a qualitative methodology, focusing on in-depth interviews with young urban followers of 'Long Teng Hu Yue Long Shou Yi'. As a generation born and raised during China's accelerated modernization since 1990s, they are particularly situated to express complex tensions between attachment and distance. Through thematic analysis informed by

critical communication theories and cultural studies with particular attention to rural representations, this research explores how audience engagement with rural representations reflects the reproduction of symbolic inequalities. In doing so, it highlights why these processes matter for understanding the symbolic and affective dimensions of inequality in a rapidly modernizing society, and why the rural remains central for grasping the social and cultural dimensions of inequality in contemporary China.

## **THEORETICAL CHAPTER**

In contemporary China, urban perceptions of rural life are becoming increasingly complex, shaped by socio-economic transformations, modernization discourses, and evolving media practices. Drawing on perspectives from modernization theory, media and cultural studies, and audience research, this chapter reviews existing scholarship on the structural, representational, and interpretive dimensions of rurality and peasants, as well as on broader underprivileged groups. This chapter aims to understand how rural China is culturally constructed and mediated within the process of China's modernization. It provides a theoretical foundation for examining how urban audiences interpret rural representations, express emotional orientations, and negotiate these meanings within broader ideological and modernity-driven frameworks.

### **Rurality in Modernisation**

In the Chinese context, where agrarian society has historically formed the foundation of social and cultural life (Fei *et al.*, 1992), the rural occupies a particularly significant position in debates on modernization and modernity (Zhao, 2010). To situate this study, it is crucial to examine how the rural has been discursively positioned within modernization theories and how these frameworks illuminate the structural and symbolic inequalities that shape urban-rural relations.

Classic modernization theories conceptualized modernity as a universal and linear trajectory moving from agrarian and traditional life toward industrialized and urbanized societies (Rostow, 1960; Eisenstadt, 2017). Within this framework, the rural was cast as the archetype of

'premodern' society, valued primarily as raw material to be transformed or overcome in the modernization process (Bradley, 1992; Boccock, 1992).

Although subsequent scholarship has criticized classic theories for its linear and Eurocentric assumptions, Western patterns of modernity continue to serve as a basic reference point for other societies (Eisenstadt, 2017). As Chang (2010) argues, in much of the developing countries including China, modernization has been narrowly equated with (capitalist) economic development and Western-oriented models of progress, and their indigenous systems of society and culture were reconceived as obsolete or unjust, modernity was therefore to be achieved by radically breaking away from their past rather than by gradually building upon it. This suggests that the position of rural in modernization project of developing countries has explicitly or implicitly influenced by the Western patterns of modernity.

To capture the specificity of East Asian modernization, Chang (1999, 2022) developed the concept of compressed modernity, where multiple layers of tradition and modernity coexist and overlap within a single social and temporal space. Importantly, compressed modernity also generates hierarchies of legitimacy: modern and Western-oriented elements are deemed progressive and rational, whereas rural and indigenous practices are delegitimized as backward or deficient. In this sense, modernization itself is not a neutral process of development but a generative mechanism of inequality, producing categories of advancement and backwardness that structure both social life and cultural imagination.

In China, compressed modernity has fueled rapid industrialization and urbanization while simultaneously maintaining rural social structures and traditional practices. This simultaneity has exacerbated fractures between the 'modern' and the 'traditional', embodied in the urban-rural divide (Sun, 2003). The institutionalization of these inequalities was further entrenched through China's urban-rural binary structure (Sun, 2003). Since the 1950s, the hukou system has divided the population into rural and urban sectors, producing barriers in mobility, welfare access, and social participation (Chan, 2009). While reforms in the 1990s relaxed some restrictions, new forms of inequality emerged. As China's economy became increasingly integrated into global capitalism, urban prosperity expanded while rural areas declined, leaving peasants excluded from modernization and often trapped in poverty (Luo & Wen,

2014; Zhao, Zhu & Liang, 2020). Therefore, China's modernization not only transforms the economy but also creates enduring structural hierarchies between urban and rural populations. Policy responses such as the 'New Socialist Countryside', the 'No. 1 Central Documents,' and the Rural Revitalization Strategy attempted to address these entrenched inequalities. According to some scholars, these efforts constitute an alternative attempt to challenge the capitalist linear model of modernization, which privileges urban expansion while marginalizing rural areas (e.g., Zhao, 2015; Zhao, 2020). In line with this strategic shift, the modernization process in China has witnessed a gradual change from a period of urban bias that marginalized rural development to one characterized by 'industry nurturing agriculture and cities supporting the countryside,' and by the 'harmonious economic development' of both urban and rural areas, which positioned the rural as the primary object of modernization (Li, 2020). Therefore, modernization theory should be understood not merely as a developmental narrative but as a framework of inequality. It produces hierarchies that distinguish who is considered modern and who is deemed traditional, legitimate, or deficient. These hierarchies are then mediated, reproduced, and contested through cultural production and media representation. In this way, modernization generates inequality not only structurally, through institutions like the hukou system, but also culturally, through discourses and representations that shape collective understandings of rurality. These dynamics provide the theoretical foundation for analyzing how cultural inequality is enacted and reproduced in the representation and reception of rural China today.

### **Rurality in Media Representations**

The discursive construction of 'others' has long been central to the operation of modernity. As Hall (1992) reminds us, modernity depends on symbolic boundaries that separate the civilized from the backward, the modern from the premodern. This process of othering is enacted through representation, embedding power relations in binary oppositions such as urban/rural and modern/traditional. Within critical communication studies, othering is understood as a discursive practice of stereotyping, denigration, or symbolic annihilation that undermines marginalized groups' claims to recognition and belonging (Cottle, 2007). In the Chinese context, modernization has not only redistributed material resources but also produced

cultural hierarchies that legitimize the marginalization of peasants and rural society. In the process, media representations have been a central site where binaries of self and other, civilized and backward, modern and premodern are naturalized and circulated (Zhao, 2010).

As China's modernization and industrialization accelerated, its media system underwent profound transformations. Market reforms in the 1980s and 1990s shifted mass media from functioning primarily as state 'mouthpieces' to profit-driven enterprises that increasingly targeted the emerging urban middle class (Zhao, 2008). In this process, peasants and the rural were systematically marginalized, silenced, or distorted within mainstream discourse (Zhao, 2010).

Even when peasants were made visible, this visibility was tightly circumscribed. In the early 2000s, the state promoted the 'three closenesses' (*san tiejin*) and 'harmonious society' discourse to stabilize tensions arising from inequality. Media coverage increasingly highlighted 'model' migrant workers who contributed to modernization, but at the same time, peasants were portrayed through crime reports, labor disputes, and human-interest stories, which cast them as potential threats to social stability (Sun, 2012a; Zhao, 2002). These representations reinforced images of peasants as victims, troublemakers, passive beneficiaries of state benevolence, or a group in need of moral education and personal development (Sun, 2012b; Zhao, 2010).

At the center of this representational regime was the discourse of *suzhi* (quality), which coded distinctions between peasants and the urban middle class while suggesting strategies for social mobility for each (Sun, 2012a). According to Anagnost (2004), *suzhi* operates ideologically as a representational framework that enables individuals to situate themselves within the wider social hierarchy. Within this discourse, peasants are persistently depicted as the raw material for projects of civilizing, education, and self-improvement (Jacka, 1998; Fu, 2009). Rural China was thus discursively established as the negative counterpart to urban modernity. It is a space marked by poverty, ignorance, and disorder, contrasted against cities imagined as modern, cultured, and progressive (Wei, 2004; Dong, 2024; Li, 2020). These discursive framings enacted symbolic violence by detaching peasants' struggles from structural injustices and reframing them instead as problems of individual deficiency or moral failure (Dong, 2024).

## Rurality in Social Media Contexts

While this way of representation was rooted in the logics of state propaganda and market-oriented mass media, it did not disappear with the rise of digital platforms. Platform capitalism rearticulates these symbolic hierarchies through new infrastructures of visibility and value (Gillespie, 2010). The rise of short video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, along with e-commerce infrastructures, appeared to open new spaces for rural self-representation. Studies highlight that rural creators gained visibility, agency and subjectivity and even economic opportunity through user-generated content (Luan & Su, 2019).

However, visibility in digital platforms is never neutral. Drawing on Goffman's (1958) analysis, acts of self-representation are a form of impression management, shaped by perceived audience expectations and unspoken rules. This dynamic determines which aspects of the self are performed on the 'front stage' and which are concealed in the 'back stage'. Within platform capitalism, rural self-representations are embedded in political-economic structures and digital cultural ecologies that both enable and constrain expressive practices (Fuchs, 2009; Wallis, 2018).

Platform logics, particularly algorithmic curation, virality, and monetization, do not simply amplify rural voices but channel them into specific aesthetic and discursive forms that resonate with dominant cultural hierarchies (Liu, 2018). Short video platforms reward content that generates immediate affective engagement, yet what counts as 'engaging' is largely defined by mainstream, urban-oriented tastes and cultural sensibilities (Li, 2020). As a result, rural content is disproportionately filtered into two dominant genres.

The first centers nostalgic pastoral imagery, which highlights landscapes, farm work, food, and folk customs. These videos appeal to urban middle-class audiences by constructing the countryside as a pastoral idyll, a site of simplicity and authenticity that provides escape from the alienation of modern urban life (Li, 2020; Xu & Wang, 2021).

The second relies on exaggerated humor, awkward dances, spoof sketches or shout-rapping (Luan & Su, 2019). These are consumed as spectacle, allowing urban viewers to enjoy the rural as comedic, excessive, or backward, where rural creators' performances are interpreted as 'lowbrow' or 'tuwei' (vulgar taste) (Zhou, 2019), reinforcing urban audiences' sense of

distinction and superiority, and even generating a range of distorted and stigmatized image of peasants (Wang & Xu, 2022).

Both the pastoral and tuwei genres flatten the diversity of rural life into recognizable tropes and reaffirm the symbolic hierarchy between urban modernity and rural backwardness, with the rural China consistently relegated as 'others' (Wang & Xu, 2022; Cao & Cao, 2021). At the same time, this generic narrowing makes it difficult for rural creators to circulate content that foregrounds structural issues, such as land dispossession, labor precarity, or rural hardship (Luan & Su, 2019; Li, 2020). As Liu (2018) observes, only a minority of rural videos engage explicitly with the 'three rural issues', and even then, these representations remain largely descriptive rather than critical, rarely provoking broader discussions of structural inequality, since such themes are less likely to be rewarded by the algorithm.

The integration of e-commerce further shapes representational strategies (Lyu, 2017). As Andrejevic (2011) points out, driven by the pursuit of online traffic and its potential commercial value, content creators gradually shift from 'self-expression' to 'self-promotion'. Livestream sales, fan tipping, and brand sponsorships create economic incentives that encourage creators to brand themselves in ways that are legible and profitable within platform economies and to align their identities with marketable categories such as the 'authentic peasant laborer,' the 'wholesome countryside cook', or the 'quirky rural comedian' (Liu, 2018; Li, 2020). These categories reproduce, rather than subvert, urban-centered imaginaries of the rural (Liu & Zhou, 2019; Cao & Cao, 2021).

This creates a paradox: while underprivileged groups gain new symbolic and material opportunities, their agency is structured within dominant cultural and economic logics (Jeppesen & Petrick, 2018; Wang & Sandner, 2019). To attract attention and income, many creators tailor their performances to meet the expectations of urban consumers.

This process constitutes a form of self-othering, in which rural users internalize and reproduce stereotypes rather than offering autonomous counter-narratives (Liu & Zhou, 2019).

Therefore, the rise of rural user-generated content on platforms cannot be read simply as a story of inclusion or empowerment. Although such content offers rural creators new visibility and opportunities, it often reproduces the rural-urban dichotomy it ostensibly seeks to

challenge. Platform capitalism can also translates macro-level modernization discourses into micro-level practices of representation, commodifying the rural as a cultural resource while continually reinscribing it as the symbolic 'other' of urban modernity through algorithmic, viral, and monetized circuits of digital media. As Li (2020) notes, the celebration of rural vitality remains premised on the assumption that the countryside must be modernized, reflecting enduring discursive constructions of rural China as 'other' within the project of modernity. In this sense, the rural is consistently positioned as the opposite of the rational order and values pursued by modern urban consciousness (Liu, 2018).

Yet representation never fully determines meaning. How audiences interpret, negotiate, or resist these symbolic constructions is equally crucial for understanding how cultural inequality is reproduced in everyday practice. This directs attention to the third body of literature which focusing on audience reception.

### **Audience Receptions**

Although the above literature focuses primarily on the discourse and representation of rural China, it often contains implicit claims about audiences. As Ong (2014) notes, studies on audience ethics in relation to underprivileged groups involve both consumption and reception. Consumption research highlights how the visibility of marginalized groups is linked to audience desires and mainstream tastes, often driven by curiosity (Lalvani, 1995). Reception research, by contrast, focuses on the interpretive and affective work through which audiences position themselves in relation to these 'others'.

Critical communication studies have been especially concerned with the sociocultural consequences of representing underprivileged groups, particularly the role of media in producing and reproducing cultural inequality. On the one hand, representations shape public understandings of underprivileged groups and of the social issues attached to them, thereby influencing whether such groups gain cultural recognition and respect in mainstream society (Li, 2005). On the other hand, representations articulate audiences' emotional and ethical orientations toward others (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2008, 2013; Silverstone, 2006). By strategically selecting language and imagery, media reproduce symbolic inequalities and representational hierarchies, not only exposing audiences to visual image of others but also shaping the

dispositions through which audiences perceive, feel, and respond. Depending on the mode of representation, audiences may respond with compassion and responsibility or, conversely, indifference, detachment, or even superiority (Chouliaraki, 2006, 2008). Some representations foster empathy, sympathy, or pity, while others promote a narcissistic sense of moral distinction between 'us' and 'them' (Dong, 2024), aestheticize suffering as spectacle (Chouliaraki, 2008), generate compassion fatigue (Kinnick *et al.*, 1996; Maier, 2015), or even denial of compassion (Hoijer, 2004; Seu, 2010). In this sense, the politics of representation are inseparable from the politics of reception, positioning audiences ethically in relation to inequality.

Yet, as Livingstone (2019, p. 179) critiques, 'all analyses of media power include, implicitly if not explicitly, claims about audiences.' Many studies on representation infer media effects directly from analyses of representations, which often relies on a linear model in which powerful media transmit messages to passive audiences (Livingstone, 1998). Similarly, several critical communication scholars have also argued that representations alone cannot determine audience positions and have called for empirical audience research to reveal how such representations are consumed and interpreted (Ong, 2009; Joye, 2013; Ong, 2014).

Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980) provides a theoretical framework for addressing this limitation by conceptualizing audiences as active interpreters. While media texts are encoded with preferred meanings, audiences may accept, negotiate, or resist these readings depending on their social and cultural positioning. However, in the Chinese context, much scholarship speculates about urban nostalgia, empathy, or stigma toward rural China and peasants. These studies often argue that discourses such as *suzhi* logic and nostalgia condition the interpretive repertoires available to audiences, thereby assuming how rurality is perceived. Yet few studies have systematically examined how audiences actually interpret rural representations in practice.

Importantly, audience interpretation is also embedded in structures of power. Silverstone's (2007) concept of the mediapolis, though developed in relation to distant suffering, emphasizes not only the media's moral responsibility but also the audience's ethical agency. Each act of interpretation and emotional reaction, whether recognition, rejection, or indifference, constitutes an ethical positioning toward the represented other.

Applied to the urban–rural context, urban audiences’ responses to rural representations can be understood as moral practice that define their relationship to rural groups. Whether audiences express empathy, distance, or denial are ethical choices embedded in cultural hierarchies and power relations. This ethical dimension highlights why studying audiences is indispensable for understanding cultural inequality: reception, no less than representation, is a site where inequalities are reproduced or contested.

At the same time, Hall’s model reminds us that meaning negotiation always occurs within ideological boundaries shaped by larger structural conditions. As Livingstone (1998) stresses, analyses of audience positions must show how micro-level processes of reception are embedded in, and contribute to, macro-level societal and cultural dynamics. Scholars of rural studies have pointed out that rural representations and imaginations can be deeply normative and power-infused, often constructing the rural in ways that reflect hegemonic middle-class visions (Halfacree, 1993; Shucksmith, 2018).

In the Chinese context, media production is shaped by state power, market forces, and popular aesthetics, which frame the conditions under which audiences interpret media texts and often produce divergences between encoded intentions and audience readings (Zeng & Sparks, 2019). Audience practices such as how urban viewers imagine, interpret, or emotionally orient themselves toward rural representations are therefore not merely individual acts of meaning-making, but processes engaged with broader ideological discourses.

### **Conceptual framework**

This dissertation integrates critical social theory, media studies, and audience reception research to explore how rural representations are perceived and interpreted by young urban Chinese social media users, and how these interpretations reflect and reproduce broader ideological discourses. Critical theory, in its contemporary developments, emphasizes two primary forms of inequality: socio-economic inequality and cultural-symbolic inequality (Li, 2005). These dimensions reflect divergent but complementary analytical traditions and inform the conceptualization of rural as disadvantaged groups in this dissertation.

At the macro level, theories of modernity and modernization are situated within this critical framework to examine how social, economic, and political transformations generate and

entrench structural inequalities. Modernization is understood not as a neutral developmental process, but as a material and ideological force that produces and legitimizes marginality. This macro perspective helps situate rural China within national projects of development and social change, clarifying their marginalized status in the social structure.

However, structural inequality alone is insufficient to sustain hierarchies. As Sun & Miao (2016) argue, socio-economic inequalities depend on supporting cultural narratives and symbolic hierarchies to appear legitimate and natural. To theorize this dimension, the study turns to critical communication studies, which provide tools for analyzing how cultural inequality is produced and perpetuated.

Drawing on Fraser (1997), this study examines cultural inequality as a form of injustice. Cultural injustice includes cultural domination, nonrecognition and disrespect. Building on this, Fraser & Honneth (2003) argued that mainstream society exerts symbolic power over underprivileged groups in two primary ways: unrecognition, which involves the systematic erasure of a group's culture and perspectives, and misrecognition, which acknowledges marginalized groups but frames them through biased perceptions.

Critical communication studies offer a theoretical perspective that rural representations constitute a form of othering that reinforces urban-centric cultural hierarchies. Yet, the process of cultural inequality remains incomplete without consideration of its reception. Audience reception is a crucial site where cultural inequality is either reproduced or challenged. To examine this, this study integrates Hall's encoding/decoding model (1980) to investigate how young, urban-based audiences interpret rural representations. This model offers a methodological bridge between media texts produced within ideological frameworks and the ways audiences interpret these meanings. The interpretations and emotional orientations of urban youth are key sites of embedded practices within cultural inequality. By examining how audiences interpret rural representations, this study seeks to reveal how they negotiate meanings of 'rural life' and 'rural groups', and how these negotiations are intertwined with wider power relations and cultural hierarchies.

## **Research gap & Research question**

Despite the rich theoretical foundation laid by existing scholarship, there are several research gaps identified in the process.

Despite extensive scholarship on modernization and communication in China, most analyses of modernization focus on macro-level structures, while little attention is given to how ordinary citizens experience and interpret these transformations in their everyday cultural life. In particular, the cultural position of the rural and the peasantry, historically central to Chinese society, has rarely been examined through the lens of audience interpretation.

Existing discussions of rural marginalization and cultural inequality in China often remain at a theoretical level, lacking empirical evidence of how these processes are enacted and negotiated in media consumption. Critical communication studies have extensively analyzed rural-to-urban migrant workers as symbols of China's underprivileged, yet rural peasants as a broader and distinct social group remain relatively overlooked, often conflated with migrants in a homogenized manner (e.g., Wei, 2004).

More importantly, Chinese media studies have predominantly emphasized media representations of rurality but seldom empirically investigated how audiences interpret them. Few studies investigate how urban audiences interpret rural representations, how these interpretations are shaped by modernization discourses, and how they reproduce or challenge cultural hierarchies.

This research aims to address these gaps by offering an empirical analysis of the interpretations of rural representations and the emotional orientations enacted by urban audiences in their engagement with them, demonstrating how these interpretations both reflect and reproduce broader cultural inequalities in contemporary China.

Building on the theoretical and conceptual framework, this study seeks to answer the following research question:

**RQ:** How do young urban-based audiences in China perceive and interpret rural representations on social media, and how are these interpretations related to broader ideological discourses?

By addressing this question, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how cultural inequality is reproduced through everyday media practices. It reveals the nuanced ways in which audiences become complicit in, or resistant to, dominant narratives of modernity and development, highlighting the role of audience agency within larger structures of ideological reproduction.

## **METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN**

This study aims to explore the participants' perceptions and interpretations of the rural representations, especially participants' understandings, feelings and attitudes about rural life and rural groups, and how these perceptions are shaped by audiences' socioeconomic positions and ideological backgrounds. This study will adopt a qualitative approach to address this research question.

### **Methodological Rationale**

Semi-structured interviews are well-suited for collecting data that yields contextualized insights into how rural representations are perceived and interpreted. This method allows for the exploration of individuals' beliefs, attitudes, values, and motivations within specific social contexts, and provides rich, in-depth descriptions of their social environment (Gaskell, 2000). Therefore, the semi-structured interviews allow for an in-depth exploration of participants' feelings, attitudes, and lived experiences, while also uncovering how these perceptions are influenced by their socioeconomic status, cultural values, and ideological contexts.

Compared to highly structured interviews, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to flexibly modify questions based on conversation flow and participant perspectives (Fielding & Thomas, 2016; Gaskell, 2000). This approach integrates open-ended and theory-informed questions, aligning with research aims (Galletta & Cross, 2013). Participants can elaborate thoughts and seek clarification (Seidman, 2006), fostering deeper, more accurate sharing of experiences. Unlike focus groups, individual interviews reduce social pressure and group influence, enabling open expression on sensitive topics like rural China's social hierarchies (Gaskell, 2000; Silverman, 2019).

## **Research Design**

### **Case Selection Strategy**

This study selects the rural content creator 'Long Teng Hu Yue Long Shou Yi' as the entry point for exploring audience perceptions of rural representation. The choice is theoretically significant: the creator's popularity challenges assumptions of the existing cultural divide in media consumption and production across social classes. While peasants have historically been situated as a subaltern group, China's commercial media increasingly prioritizes middle-class urban tastes (Zhao, 2008), creating tensions between visibility and authenticity in rural self-representations.

The creator's wide following across platforms reinforces this relevance. With over 2.55 million followers on Bilibili and 3.2 million on Kwai, their content reaches socially diverse audiences and circulates beyond rural communities. This visibility across the urban-rural divide suggests the potential to bridge cultural boundaries and challenge existing cultural inequalities.

By investigating how young urban-based participants interpret and evaluate this creator's videos, the study explores how participants, through comparisons and illustrations, develop generalized understandings of rural representation. In doing so, it examines not only cultural perceptions of rurality but also the broader dynamics of cultural inequality. Thus, 'Long Teng Hu Yue Long Shou Yi' offers both an empirically rich and theoretically generative case through which to examine the intersections of urban-rural relation, media, and representation in contemporary China.

### **Sampling Strategy**

This study employed purposive sampling to identify suitable participants. In qualitative research, the goal is to sample the range of views (Gaskell, 2000). Purposive sampling selects participants based on predetermined criteria aligned with the research objectives, aiming to include individuals who can provide rich and relevant information about the topic (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

Participants were required to be followers of 'Long Teng Hu Yue Long Shou Yi'. This ensured that respondents could provide detailed insights based on familiarity with the content and its themes.

Informed by the pilot study, rural or urban origin was identified as a primary sampling criterion, as it may influence perceptions of rural representations. Additional criteria, drawn from the assumptions of scientific episteme (Fisher & Mehozay, 2019), included gender, age, occupation, income level, rural or urban base, and geographic location. These were considered to enhance socioeconomic diversity and broaden the range of perspectives captured.

Recruitment was conducted by publishing recruitment posts on Red Note. Since RedNote lacks dedicated recruitment sections, rural-related hashtags were used to enhance visibility and attract relevant users through the platform's algorithm.

The recruitment message included an introduction to the study, eligibility criteria (i.e., followers of the content creator who are familiar with the videos), a description of the interview format, and a statement on confidentiality and ethics.

This approach aimed to spread recruitment information to a diverse socio-demographic audience. However, limitations include RedNote's tendency to attract predominantly female, Gen-Z users from Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities (Ju, 2022), and algorithmic filtering that may reinforce echo chambers potentially limiting participant diversity. Additionally, there may be biases between the views of participants willing to engage and those of the broader audience.

After recruitment, basic demographic information such as origin, residence, gender, location, occupation, education, and income was collected to guide final participant selection. Maximum variation sampling was used to include participants with diverse characteristics which might influence their understanding and perception of rural representations, helping this research explore rich and diverse viewpoints and identify both shared patterns and unique variations (Patton, 2015). Ultimately, 12 participants were selected, as detailed in Appendix A.

## **Interview Guide**

Following Gaskell (2000), the interview guide was developed through literature review, field observation, and supervisory discussions. Using rural-themed media as an entry point, the interviews explored participants' interpretations and imaginations of rural China, revealing insights into cultural inequality and shifting values within modernization.

Guided by Galletta and Cross (2013), each session began with informed consent and open-ended questions about personal experiences. Subsequent questions addressed key themes: rural life as distinct from urban norms, and rural populations as both ancestral origins and marginalized groups. The guide incorporated theoretical frameworks and China's socio-cultural context, informed by prior video analyses and audience comments from platforms like Bilibili and Kwai.

Throughout, I adjusted question order and added probes for clarity and examples (Warren, 2001). The conclusion invited final reflections and followed up on contradictory or unclear responses. Each interview lasted about 60 minutes; the guide was refined based on a pilot study to improve focus and avoid repetition. The full guide is provided in Appendix B.

## **Thematic Analysis**

This study employs thematic analysis to examine data from semi-structured interviews, as it effectively identifies and interprets both explicit and implicit patterns and themes within participants' narratives (Guest *et al.*, 2012). This approach is well-suited to exploring how individuals perceive rural representations and how these interpretations reveal emotions, attitudes, and cultural positioning within broader ideological discourses.

The analysis incorporates both deductive and inductive approaches. Deductive analysis draws on pre-existing theories such as nostalgia and othering, as well as studies on Chinese modernization, helping identify socially or culturally significant expressions even when implicitly conveyed. Inductively, it allows new themes to emerge directly from the data, enabling systematic yet flexible insight discovery (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Guest *et al.*, 2012). This dual strategy ensures the analysis remains theoretically informed and empirically grounded.

Thematic networks (Attride-Stirling, 2001) are used to hierarchically organize findings, facilitating a structured understanding of how meanings are constructed around rural representations within wider social and ideological contexts. The thematic analysis grid is included in Appendix C.

### **Ethics and Reflexivity**

Ethical considerations were central throughout this study. The research ethics application was reviewed and approved by the department, ensuring compliance with institutional guidelines. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, who were reminded of the voluntary nature of participation and the guarantee of confidentiality.

Throughout the research process, I consistently ensured the anonymity and confidentiality (Wiles *et al.*, 2008). Personal information of participants was protected and avoided disclosing any information and background that could be identified. To protect privacy, data were anonymized and securely stored in LSE OneDrive, with recordings and transcripts scheduled for deletion once the dissertation process is completed.

Reflexivity was a central component of the study, recognizing the researcher's role in shaping both the research process and its outcomes (Lincoln *et al.*, 2011; Braun & Clarke, 2019). My personal experience of growing up in an underdeveloped area before moving to a first-tier city exposed me to both disadvantaged and elite spaces. This cross-class background has given me the ability to relate to participants across diverse socioeconomic contexts. It enabled me to engage with interviewees empathetically and contextually, creating conditions for more natural and meaningful exchanges (Bonner & Tolhurst, 2002; Berger, 2013). At the same time, my current socioeconomic position and critical academic orientation sometimes encouraged a more questioning or skeptical stance toward interviewees' accounts. I continually reflected on whether this dual tendency risked positioning me with a sense of superiority or bias, rather than approaching narratives as situated and context-dependent (Campbell, 1998; Warren, 2001).

My reflexivity was also shaped by the broader structural context of Chinese modernization. As an individual whose life path is deeply intertwined with these social transformations, I share with participants the experience of being shaped by larger ideological and structural

forces. This 'insider' status allowed me to access participants' perspectives with a deeper sense of resonance, but it also demanded ongoing critical self-examination. I sought to balance empathy with critical distance by not only examining participants' narratives, but also interrogating my own assumptions, reactions, and potential biases.

During analysis, I aimed to acknowledge the layered complexity of participants' experiences rather than reducing them to simplified categories. By integrating personal reflexivity with rigorous methodological framework through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis supported by ethical safeguards, I sought to produce findings that capture both the authenticity and the critical dimensions of participants' voices.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS**

This chapter presents the findings from semi-structured interviews with young urban Chinese audiences, addressing the core research question of how they perceive and interpret rural representations of 'Long Teng Hu Yue Long Shou Yi' on social media and how these interpretations relate to broader ideological discourses. The analysis uses a thematic approach to describe participants' perceptions at the cognitive level, focusing on both the shared sense of authenticity that defines rural China and the divergent perspectives urban- and rural-origin participants in their rural imaginaries and understandings. Building on this, the chapter examines the complex emotional and moral responses that these representations evoke. Finally, it demonstrates how these interpretations ultimately reflect the internalization of dominant modernist logics regarding development and urban-rural hierarchy. Throughout the analysis, direct quotes from participants are used to ground the findings. The relevant theoretical frameworks are engaged to provide a critical interpretation of these themes and their significance.

### **Perceived Authenticity of Rural Life**

When asked what made the content creator stand out to them, all twelve participants emphasized the 'authenticity' of his videos. This is not a trivial observation, since authenticity is not a self-evident quality but a socially constructed one. As Beerends and Aydin (2021) argue,

claims to authenticity are often mobilized as a form of social control and a reflection of power relations. This implies that what audiences regard as authentic is never neutral. Rather, it reflects broader ideological currents, dominant cultural values, and entrenched hierarchies. In this sense, how participants construct perceptions of authenticity in relation to rural China offers insight not only into their understandings and imaginations of rural China but also the cultural inequalities embedded in mainstream imaginaries.

### **Inauthentic Rurality: Idyllic Retreats and Performed Excess**

To delineate what counted as authentic, participants first articulated what they considered inauthentic. Many contrasted their own impressions with mainstream rural-themed reality shows and films. Across accounts, these productions were criticized for presenting only a partial, idealized version of the rural China, highlighting its 'idyllic' and 'poetic' qualities while downplaying hardship and complexity. Several participants described such portrayals as a distinctly 'urban middle-class' or 'elite' vision of rural life, one that emphasized leisure, entertainment, and emotional comfort rather than the realities of agricultural production and everyday struggle. As Participant 1 explained:

*They just built a utopia in the countryside, it's not really something that presents rural life [...] I feel like it's too fake [...] I think what they're trying to convey is more aligned with the mainstream discourse, like 'look how well our new countryside has developed', the idea of a beautiful countryside. Because after all, they're still part of the mainstream discourse. But short videos aren't part of that mainstream. They might be able to present something that is less filtered.*

Similarly, Participant 12 emphasized that films such as *My People, My Homeland* and variety shows like *Back to Field* do not aim to document reality but instead selectively amplify positive images for ideological or propagandistic purposes:

*Their main goal isn't really to show something real. [...] What I mean is, they're more from a propaganda perspective. These shows look more harmonious or peaceful. But they only show the better parts of daily life, while the less positive aspects are beautified or hidden.*

For some participants, inauthenticity also arose through rural short videos that exaggerated comedy or vulgarity in pursuit of traffic. Participant 3 explicitly identified such performances as distorted by platform logics of virality:

*On Kwai, it's different. Their motivation for traffic is much stronger, so the people who make videos deliberately exaggerate certain things, use comic or over-the-top methods. This way they grab people's attention quickly and increase traffic. Some are really exaggerated, some just play for laughs.*

As pointed out by Zou (2022), rural representations are shaped by institutional and platform logics such as algorithms, traffic incentives, and state or market imperatives. However, participants' skepticism shows that they can recognize these logics and norms filter authenticity. This interpretive stance aligns with reception studies that emphasize the active role of audiences in decoding media (Hall, 1990; Livingstone, 1998). To some extent, their interpretations were autonomous, as audiences resisted both commercial and propaganda narratives by privileging forms of representation that appeared less filtered.

### **Authentic Rurality: Material Hardship and Economic Condition**

If authenticity is the feature that participants most strongly associated with the content creator, what specifically made his videos feel 'authentic'? A recurring theme was the emphasis on material and economic realities of rural life. Agricultural labor, livestock raising, underdeveloped infrastructure, and poor sanitary conditions were repeatedly cited as indicators of authenticity. Participant 5, who had never lived in the countryside, nevertheless found the material details convincing:

He really squats down in the mud, rolling up his trousers all covered in dirt, and treats those animals. [...] You see the crops, the fields, the poultry, and the farmers themselves, there's a strong sense of connection to rural life. [...] The background is simple, often just the dirt walls of farmyards. Sometimes you see things drying in the sun. The sense of authenticity is quite high.

For participant 10, the lack of professional veterinary equipment conveys an impression of 'primitiveness', which was interpreted as proof of authenticity:

The farmer's home environment is very ordinary. I've seen another female blogger who treats cattle, and she always has full protective gear. This vet barely uses any. It's very simple, gives a kind of primitive feeling.

Economic hardship was also central to participants' evaluations. They consistently interpreted dependence on agriculture for subsistence, the financial significance of livestock, and struggles to make ends meet as markers of authenticity. Participant 1 noted:

It shows real rural life, that is, some people still rely entirely on farming for basic living. [...] A cow can still be crucial for a family, and sometimes 30 yuan can be hard to come by. There's still a lot of hardship in the countryside.

Participant 12 offered a concrete economic rationale:

Nowadays raising cattle or sheep isn't really profitable. In the videos, I saw some villagers with sick cattle. Once the animal gets thin, the owner sometimes won't bother to treat it but will slaughter it directly, because if it gets any thinner, they'll lose money, as if raising it was for nothing. It feels very real. For these farmers, livestock is their livelihood, and they sometimes value it more than themselves.

Participants 11 and 12 used the term 'backwardness' to describe what they saw:

It still feels relatively backward, quite desolate and not yet affluent. You can see it from the living conditions, like the heated brick beds ('kang').

It's really backward and poor. Some houses are broken down, the roads freeze in winter, and sometimes his car stalls on the way. It's really rural.

This emphasis on poverty and deprivation challenges dominant assumptions in existing studies of rural self-representations on Chinese social media, which often suggest that audiences favor either nostalgic pastoral imagery or exaggerated 'tuwei' performances while avoiding depictions of hardship. Contrary to that view, participants here actively recognized unappealing, even harsh details like poverty, poor infrastructure, precarious livelihoods as constitutive of rural authenticity.

Yet here lies a paradox. While their interpretations suggest a more independent orientation toward media texts, one that resists platform logics and state discourse, participants simultaneously reaffirmed another essentialized image of rural China that 'should be' underdeveloped, primitive, and backward. These interpretations remain constrained by cultural expectations that view the countryside as a premodern 'other' to modern urbanity. As Loughran (2024) observes, authenticity often aligns with the values of dominant groups. By

projecting their expectations onto rural content, urban audiences thereby reinforcing symbolic hierarchies between city and rural. This tension invites a closer examination of how participants from different social origins (urban versus rural) construct distinct imaginaries of rural life.

### **Difference in Rural Imagination**

According to Appadurai (1990), the images, narratives, and textual forms produced by media serve as the raw materials from which audiences construct imagined worlds. Although both rural- and urban-origin participants can challenge media texts to some extent, rural-origin participants draw on lived experiences and embodied knowledge that provide alternative frames for negotiating media representations. By contrast, for individuals without such experiences, their imagination of rural China (seen only as the lives of ‘others in other places’) relies almost entirely on mediated elements and thus tends to reproduce mediascape narratives, perpetuating cultural inequality. This divergence shows that while rural- and urban-origin participants share certain perceptions of rural life, they also differ in some ways, reflecting broader patterns of cultural inequality.

### **Urban-Origin Imaginaries**

Urban-origin participants frequently imagined rural life as slow-paced, monotonous, and restorative, which is a lifestyle that offered an antidote to the stress of accelerated urban life. As Participant 1 described, rural life in the videos seemed to consist of ‘just farming, cooking, eating, doing housework, and scrolling on the phone.’ The simplicity of these activities was taken as evidence of a less pressured way of living. Participant 5 expanded on this view:

Because I’ve always lived in the city, I’ve never had that kind of rural life. [...] I really like that rural feeling. The city is noisy, full of cars, tall buildings, and you feel this sense of oppression. In the countryside, there’s green mountains, rivers, fields. It’s relaxing. Waking up to roosters and seeing cooking smoke at sunset, this slow pace gave me a sense of ease, like all my stress could temporarily be put aside. It is healing.

## Rural-Origin Accounts

Rural-origin participants strongly contested this romanticized image. Their accounts emphasized agricultural labor, economic precariousness, and the lack of leisure in daily life.

As Participant 7 explained:

*Most farmers [...] after finishing work, maybe have some time to check their phone or watch TV, that's already considered very relaxing. There's no such thing as sitting on a swing enjoying the breeze. Farmers are busy all day, worrying about crops, income, and basic survival. [...] You have very little free time throughout the day, even taking a shower feels rushed.*

Similarly, participant 2, 8 and 10 all recalled childhood villages where relatives worked in the fields late into the night during harvest season, emphasizing that 'free time' was almost nonexistent. For them, the urban-origin vision of rural leisure was not only inaccurate but also absurd.

This divergence illustrates Fraser and Honneth's (2003) notion of misrecognition, whereby marginalized groups are acknowledged but in distorted terms. Urban-origin narratives recognize rural poverty yet reframe it as simplicity and stress relief, inadvertently downplaying the structural burdens of agricultural life.

Sharma's (2014) analysis of temporal inequality further clarifies this dynamic. Different experiences of time reflect and reproduce social hierarchies. Temporalities are tied to forms of labor and to where groups are positioned in an economy of temporal worth. Rural-origin accounts illustrate how agricultural schedules and market dependencies compel peasants into exhausting, precarious rhythms. By contrast, urban-origin participants' imagination and consumption of 'slow rural time' as a temporary escape, detached from its material underpinnings. Participant 7, born and raised in rural Guangdong, recognized this dynamic bluntly:

*It's only healing if you have money. The rural life they talk about is something people from higher social classes get to experience. As long as you have sufficient financial resources, you can live a healing life wherever you go.*

Yet the contrast is not absolute. Even some rural-origin participants, despite emphasizing hardship, reframed their hometowns as spaces of recovery and refuge from urban stress.

Participant 8 reflected:

*When work gets really intense for months, I just want to go back and rest for a couple of days, to recharge myself. The way I lived in the village before could really recharge me.*

Thus, even for rural-origin participants, the countryside becomes symbolically reconfigured once detached from the necessity of agricultural labor. In this sense, both groups converge in positioning rural life as the 'other' to urban modernity, whether as a retreat or as a refuge. Yet this comfort reflects deeper temporal and cultural inequalities: the rural 'slow life' for urban healing is survival for the farmer.

## **Emotional tensions: between attachment and distancing**

### **Nostalgia for Rural Life**

Alongside the perceptions and imaginaries of rural China, participants also articulated memories and feelings of attachment that positioned the rural as a site of emotional warmth. When speaking about rural life, almost all participants referred to the community relationships, often contrasting this with the anonymity of urban environments. Rural China were described as places sustained by long-standing networks of kinship and familiarity, where *renqingwei* (warmth of human relations) was abundant and everyday interactions were marked by trust and intimacy. This reflects a classic characteristic of rural society in China. As Fei Xiaotong (1992) observed, the relative immobility of traditional rural society fostered 'a society without strangers, a society based totally on the familiar' (p. 41). Participants' accounts echoed this observation, often in the form of emotionally charged recollections.

For some urban-origin participants, this sometimes took the form of longing for a kind of close-knit childhood community they had never personally experienced. Participant 12, for example, contrasted her own digital-centered urban childhood with her mother's rural memories of collective play:

*For my mum's childhood, it was like, once she called out, a whole bunch of kids would come to play, all living so close to each other. I didn't have that kind of childhood. My own childhood was just iPads and computer games.*  
*If you ask me to name a childhood playmate, I can't even think of one name.*

For rural-origin participants, these attachments were articulated through a sense of loss when comparing past rural life with present urban experiences. Participant 9, for instance, recalled:

*When I was little, everyone played together, even with kids older than me. After growing up and moving to the city, I made friends, but it never felt the same. In the countryside, relationships felt closer. City people seem harder to talk to, more distant, and they don't value friendships in the same way.*

Similarly, Participant 8 contrasted the anonymity of city living with the intimacy of her grandmother's village:

*Where I rent now, I rarely even see my neighbors. In the elevator, I don't know anyone, and we don't greet each other, it's all strangers. But in my grandma's village, everyone knows each other, sometimes even because they've known my family for decades. They'd recognize me as someone's child right away. It feels warm, almost magical.*

Yet participants also recognized that this communal warmth is itself fragile and in decline under the pressures of urbanization. Participant 10 reflected:

*When I was a kid, the village was full of people, and everyone was warm and helpful, just like in the videos. [...] Now, there are far fewer people, mostly elderly, and the younger generation is less warm. I really miss how it was when I was young.*

These recollections illustrate not only the contrast between rural and urban life, but also an ambivalent recognition that the social atmosphere participants cherished is disappearing even within the rural area. However, for both rural- and urban-origin participants, although their attachment operated through selective memories and borrowed imaginaries, this affect did not signal a literal desire to return to the rural society (as I will demonstrate further in section 3). At the same time, their narratives conveyed an orientation toward a rural past framed as irretrievable, even as most explicitly denied experiencing *xiangchou* (rural nostalgia). In this sense, their attachment aligns with what Boym (2001) conceptualizes as reflective nostalgia: a longing that dwells on the passing of a way of life without attempting to restore it.

As Boym (2001) argues, nostalgia is 'a rebellion against the modern idea of time' (p.xv), which is a way of situating the present through reflection on what has been lost. Participants' longing can thus be read as a response to the disruption of temporal and cultural continuity in rural society, where familiar forms of social nature are increasingly displaced by mobility, aging populations, and urban values. This symbolic positioning also resonates with participants' imaginaries of the countryside as a leisurely escape from accelerated city life, as discussed in

section 1. In both cases, rurality is framed as the 'other' to modernity, either as a slow life that alleviates urban stress, or as a fading community life remembered with longing and loss.

This reveals participants are mobilizing the idea of the rural to negotiate the pressures of modern life, even while acknowledging that such ways of life may no longer exist in practice. In Boym's (2001) terms, such nostalgic attachment insists on the otherness of its object from the present, keeping it at a safe distance rather than seeking a return.

### **Suffering and Moral Interpretation**

If nostalgia revealed participants' affective attachment to a fading communal past, their responses to representations of hardship in rural life shed light on another emotional and moral orientation: the negotiation of suffering. As critical communication scholars emphasize, media portrayals of underprivileged groups are never neutral. They invite audiences to adopt particular ethical stances, shaping whether suffering becomes a basis for compassion, detachment, or even stigmatization (Chouliaraki, 2006; Joye, 2013).

Compassion, as Williams (2008) argues, forms the 'moral foundation of social justice', without which recognition and equality cannot be pursued. In this sense, how audiences feel about the suffering of peasants is not only a matter of personal affect but a site where broader inequalities are reproduced or contested.

As in Section 1, participants could acknowledge the hardships of rural life shown in the videos. Yet their interpretations rarely questioned the structural causes of this suffering. Instead, they often reframed hardship as moral strength or necessary sacrifice, thereby normalizing it. For many urban-origin participants, peasant struggles were understood not as evidence of systemic marginalization but as a source of inspiration. Participant 4 (urban, Guangzhou), for instance, described rural resilience as uplifting:

Even in such a tough environment, they can still joke around a little, and they don't really take it too heavily [...] Watching his videos, I really get this feeling that there's a bit of sweetness in the bitterness, it feels like there's still hope [...] It's just that in such harsh conditions, they still persist and stay optimistic. That makes me feel that, living in the city, I really don't have much to be anxious about [...] It's also motivating and healing for me.

Here, structural hardship is translated into individualized virtues of optimism and endurance. Rather than provoking reflection on inequality, suffering becomes a symbolic antidote to urban anxieties and a moral resource consumed by urban audiences for their own emotional needs.

For rural-origin participants, empathy was often mediated by family histories. Participant 2 (rural, Guizhou) connected agricultural labor directly to his parents' sacrifices, interpreting their hardship as sacrifice and motivation:

I felt a strong emotional resonance when seeing these farmers in the videos. My family also relied on farming, growing crops like barley to support me, to cover my living expenses and tuition for school. It felt like a sacrifice, and their qualities have always influenced me as well, encouraging me to pursue more education and leave the mountains.

This interpretation was widely echoed. Several participants described parental or grandparental labor as a 'normal' generational sacrifice for children's upward mobility:

Our parents' generation sacrificed themselves so that we could have a better life, and we carry a sense of guilt [...] I think that's just how it is. There's hardly any family that wouldn't sacrifice their own interests for the sake of their children!

For rural-origin participants, empathy did not produce a critique of systemic inequality but instead affirmed the inevitability of the 'escape from farming' narrative. Rural hardship is framed as part of a generational bargain, which parents endure so that children can escape. Rural suffering is legitimized as sacrifice, a moral choice that justifies hardship as both respectable and necessary.

Empathy also gave way to intra-group othering. Some rural-origin participants interpreted poverty not as structural but as personal failure. Participant 10 (rural, Henan) expressed frustration:

I kind of don't understand it. [...] Fewer and fewer people stay in the village, since you really can't make money that way. Everyone goes out to work. But in his videos, I see that there are still quite a lot of people in each household. And I just don't get it: they haven't made money, they can't even afford to pay the vet, so why don't they go out to be migrant workers? From the videos, many of those farmers don't even look that old, they're at an age where they could definitely go work elsewhere. And working outside would earn more than farming or raising

livestock. [...] They're not making money, they can't pay their bills, and they don't even think of doing other kinds of work. [...] I feel like they're too conservative, and maybe a bit lazy.

This interpretation aligns closely with the *suzhi* framework in media discourses (Anagnost, 2004; Sun, 2012a). Rather than attributing suffering to structural inequalities such as limited rural opportunities or exclusion from welfare, poverty was explained through deficiencies of character like conservatism, laziness, lack of ambition. Such narratives align with the representational logic whereby peasants are cast as in need of improvement, education, and self-discipline (Jacka, 1998; Zhao, 2010). This mode of interpretation resembles the logic of othering identified in studies of mass media (Dong, 2024). By detaching peasants' struggles from structural injustices and reframing them as issues of individual deficiency or moral failure, participants' interpretations became complicit in enacting symbolic violence against peasants.

Therefore, across both urban- and rural-origin accounts, suffering was rarely politicized. It was admired as resilience, legitimized as sacrifice or stigmatized as failure. Participants' responses illustrate that recognition of suffering does not automatically translate into critique. Moreover, empathy does not necessarily lead to compassion, but rather as a resource to manage personal anxieties or to affirm rural to urban mobility.

Just as nostalgia framed the rural as a cherished but distant temporal 'other', responses to suffering cast peasants as either moral exemplars or deficient objects, contained within narratives that justified their marginality. In both cases, rurality was mobilized symbolically to negotiate the pressures and aspirations of urban modern life.

This dynamic echoes Hall's (1992) argument that identity is constructed through difference, 'who we are' is defined in relation to 'who we are not'. Urban audiences' engagement with rural suffering was thus less about peasants themselves than about constructing a mirror for their own urban identities. In this process, participants positioned peasants as distant 'others', enabling reflection on their own anxieties, values, and aspirations. Yet this act of othering left structural inequalities unexamined, and in turn reinforced cultural hierarchies between the urban and the rural.

## **Broader Ideological Frames**

Participants' interpretations of, and emotional orientations towards rural representations cannot be understood in isolation, they are deeply embedded in broader ideological frameworks. Their narratives reveal a coexistence of normative internalizations, discursive awareness, and ambivalent positions toward dominant ideologies. Across accounts, participants negotiate, challenge, and sometimes rearticulate dominant discourses. Yet, these negotiations are shaped, and often constrained, by an underlying internalization of modernist and neoliberal logics.

## **Internalizing Modernist Logics**

Across all participants, regardless of background, there is a consistent assumption that urban life represents the normative goal of development. Their own choices and aspirations remained firmly anchored in a modernist imaginary where success is equated with 'moving up' into cities, white-collar jobs, and consumer lifestyles.

As stated by most participants, the rural area would not be considered a viable place to live unless there was sufficient economic security. Even when they critique the 'middle-class' representations of rural life and urban imaginaries of 'healing' rural China, their aspirations reproduce similar assumptions, positioning rural life as a leisure or aesthetic space rather than a site of productive labor.

For many rural-origin participants, this internalization of modernist vision was shaped early in life through intergenerational family expectations and community norms. From childhood, they were socialized to understand education and migration as the only viable path for upward mobility.

*It aligns with the expectations of the older generation. They all say don't stay in the village anymore; they think it's better outside. (Participant 10)*

*Most elders hope we strive hard outside. They don't want us stuck in the village. Even if you want to stay, elders expect you to go out and succeed. They think developing in a big city is definitely better. (Participant 7)*

*This is an inevitable result because there is no money to be made in the village. Staying there is like giving up. If you don't work and just stay in the village, many elders will disapprove, including grandparents who say young people should earn money outside, go to the city to develop. (Participant 9)*

All participants from rural backgrounds frame urban life as an 'outside' world that is better, successful and promising. In contrast, maintaining a rural lifestyle is equated with being stuck, giving up, and suffering. Such norms are internalized intergenerationally, creating a compelling aspiration to 'leave the land behind'. Participant 11 reflects this internalized logic as natural:

*I think this is normal. I don't want to go back to farming either. I want a higher-level life, office work conditions. (Participant 11)*

Even when rural-origin participants experience anxiety about staying in the countryside, their reasoning remains structured by modernist expectations:

*I also want that. Staying in the village puts pressure on me. I was unemployed for a while, looking for work, and I was anxious. (Participant 7)*

In fact, the above analysis of rural-origin participants' emotional responses to rural suffering have revealed this underlying logic: whether through legitimization or stigmatization, their interpretations implicitly assume that leaving the countryside and achieving mobility to the city is the 'correct' choice.

This aligns with observations made by scholars such as Zhao (2010) and Sun & Miao (2016), who note that many rural residents, having internalized dominant media narratives, tend to equate rural society with backwardness and perceive themselves as occupying a lower social status. Consequently, migration to urban areas is often regarded as the primary or even the only path toward upward mobility. Within this ideological framework, such internalized beliefs contribute to rural disintegration and weaken the foundations for forming a distinct rural subjectivity.

### **Negotiating the Official Discourse of Rural Revitalization**

In contrast, attitudes toward state-led rural revitalization are varied and ambivalent, shaped by personal experiences with local policy implementation. Some participants express cynicism,

viewing the rural revitalization narrative as hollow or overly idealistic. Participant 9 (rural-origin, Jiangxi), questions the feasibility of rural revitalization and expresses doubt about the government's capacity to achieve common prosperity:

*Rural revitalization feels impossible. What can they use to revitalize the countryside? There's nothing there. It's just a slogan. Common prosperity sounds great, but how can it happen when there are so many rural people? The urban-rural gap is too wide. In some cities, a single restaurant dish costs as much as a rural family's monthly expenses.*

By contrast, some rural-origin participants who have witnessed improvements in their hometowns express conditional affirmation of the state's rural policy. Participant 11 (rural-origin, Inner Mongolia), holds a more optimistic view. Having witnessed firsthand the local implementation of rural development policies, she uses the word *xiaokang* (well-off) to describe her family's current living conditions and believes that media representations should highlight these improvements:

*I think rural life today is what many urban people now admire. Media should show the positive aspects. After all, our village now has paved roads, modern machines for farming, and much better houses.*

However, even those who affirm rural revitalization do not see rural life as equally desirable or aspirational. When asked about her own choices, Participant 11 reiterated her preference for urban development and career paths, echoing the internalized hierarchy between urban and rural spaces.

This contrast reveals that support for rural development policies does not necessarily challenge modernist hierarchies. Rather, participants often selectively integrate official discourses into an already modernist worldview, where rural improvements are welcomed, but only to the extent that they approximate urban standards or enable urban-style life.

### **Layered Ideologies and Contradictory Positions**

Notably, participants' accounts revealed the layered and sometimes contradictory negotiations of modernization. On one level, some participants displayed discursive awareness, critiquing assumptions that rural development must culminate in urbanization, or that cities were inherently superior:

*There's this implicit belief that better rural development is meant to serve urban needs or eventually transform into urban life. It's like a linear timeline where villages must become cities to be considered developed.*

*(Participant 1)*

*They just assume cities are better than rural area. But I don't think we can compare them like that. Each has its strengths and weaknesses. (Participant 3)*

On another level, their life trajectories like prioritizing education, aspiring to urban jobs, rejecting farming all demonstrates deep alignment with modernist hierarchies. This tension highlights ideology as layered, negotiated, and internally contested rather than monolithic.

This ambivalence was particularly evident in participants' nostalgia for rural life. As previously discussed, participants often articulate a sense of longing and loss for the communal rural life of their childhood. At the same time, however, they endorse the notion that a life with better material conditions which typically associated with urban living is preferable.

For example, Participant 10 (rural-origin, Henan), and Participant 7 (rural-origin, Guangdong), both vividly recall and express nostalgia for the close-knit rural communities of their youth:

*When I was a child, everyone in the village was very warm-hearted; if you needed help, people would come without asking for payment. [...] Neighbors would help each other and greet each other warmly. [...] Now, the village has very few people left, mostly elderly. The younger generation is not as warm as before [...] I really miss how things used to be back then. The life conditions were poorer, but the spirit and way of living were still good.*

*Now, everyone is busy working and earning money every day. (Participant 10)*

*I miss it a lot. Back then I lived with my grandparents and felt mentally fulfilled. We didn't worry so much, unlike now when the pressure is very high. [...] Sometimes when I scroll through my phone at night, I feel numb and tired. (Participant 7)*

Yet both participants emphasized that 'life is better now' due to improved income and housing, framing urban migration as natural and necessary:

*The income in our village is much better than before. Previously, most people farmed or raised animals, which earned very little. Now, most people go out to work, and they are doing okay. Houses are better than before[...]*

*Life now is definitely better; society needs more material things, I think. (Participant 10)*

*I think life now is much better than when I was a child because the conditions were too poor back then. Now that we have economic strength, we have finally escaped that kind of life... (Participant 7)*

These reflections demonstrate how 'better life' is defined through development logics emphasizing income, infrastructure, and consumption rather than sociality or belonging. Emotional attachment to rural community coexists with rational prioritization of urban or modernized living, illustrating the dual internalization of modernist ideology at cognitive and affective levels.

In these accounts, nostalgic longing coexisted with rational acceptance of modernization. The definition of a 'better life' was deeply shaped by development logics which prioritize income, infrastructure, and consumption over sociality and belonging. This ambivalence illustrates how modernization is not only reproduced through explicit discourse but also internalized emotionally.

As Chang (1999) observes in compressed modernity, elites strategically deploy modern and traditional elements to maintain cultural authority. Participants' accounts suggest a similar everyday negotiation: ordinary individuals selectively embrace, reject, or nostalgically preserve aspects of 'modern' and 'traditional' life to navigate social expectations, personal aspirations, and social mobility. Rather than passively accepting dominant discourses, they actively define what to pursue, what to miss, and what to preserve, always guided by their vision of a 'better life' aligned with modernist ideals.

## **CONCLUSION**

Using content creator 'Long Teng Hu Yue Long Shou Yi' as an entry point, this dissertation has investigated how young urban-based audiences in China perceive and interpret rural representations on social media, and how these interpretations relate to broader ideological discourses. By applying on semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, this dissertation systematically explored audience reception at both cognitive and emotional levels, as well as the underlying ideological assumptions embedded in their narratives, which reveals how cognitive and emotional engagements with rural representations both reflect and reproduce cultural inequalities.

This dissertation argues that regardless of urban or rural origin, participants' perceptions, imaginaries, and emotional orientations reflect an internalization of cultural hierarchies rooted

in modernist ideologies. These ideologies privilege urban modernity as the normative standard of progress, shaping participants' aspirations and evaluations of rural life, and thereby reproducing cultural inequalities toward rural China.

The findings indicate that while participants exercise agency in negotiating media representations, their interpretations remain structured by modernist logics, which positioned rural China as 'premodern'. The divergence between urban- and rural-origin participants' imaginaries of rural life demonstrates that lived experience shapes rural perception: while urban-origin participants romanticize rurality as leisurely and restorative, rural-origin participants emphasize labor and precarity, highlighting how media-mediated imaginings both reflect and perpetuate cultural and temporal inequalities. Participants' emotional engagements with rural life reveal how affect is intertwined with internalized modernist hierarchies: rurality is simultaneously cherished, othered, and instrumentalized to negotiate urban aspirations, reinforcing cultural and structural inequalities rather than challenging them.

This research has several limitations. First, all interviewees were urban based, meaning their perspectives might already aligned with modernist mobility narratives. Future research should include participants who remain in rural areas or have returned, to explore alternative subjectivities and potential counter-narratives. Second, based on Ong's (2014) critique of audience-centered research, a limitation of this study lies in its insufficient integration of audience responses with the specific textual features that elicit those reactions, reflecting a broader disconnect between audience analysis and media text. Moreover, due to time constraints, this study could not undertake a more nuanced analysis of the entangled co-presence of different ideological discourses. For example, respondents' interpretations of rural suffering also reveal an entanglement with neoliberal values and officially promoted discourses such as 'positive energy', which is a complexity reflective of China's compressed modernity, where multiple ideological layers simultaneously shape its media and social environment. Yet these limitations inform several promising directions for future research, such as expanding participant diversity to include rural-based populations and multigenerational cohorts, while also highlighting the need for media studies to situate audience interpretations of rural representations within broader socio-structural and entangled ideological contexts.

Nonetheless, this dissertation makes significant contributions. Theoretically, it advances an understanding of how cultural inequalities are reproduced affectively and cognitively, emphasizing the intersection of modernist ideology, audience agency, and cultural hierarchies. It highlights the social implications of media consumption for urban audiences' perceptions of rural China, offering insight into the moral and emotional dimensions of mediated encounters with marginalized groups. By demonstrating the co-constitution of rural interpretations and modernist norms, this study underscores the importance of considering both reception and structural forces in analyses of media, modernization, and inequality, laying groundwork for future inquiry into more reflexive, justice-oriented forms of rural representation.

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## APPENDIX

1. **How long have you been following this content creator? What was the last thing in these videos that caught your attention? Why?**
  - ✓ Do you think the videos have changed over time? How are they different from when you first started watching?
  - ✓ Compared to other videos you have watched from this content creator, what did you like best? What did you like least? Why?
  - ✓ Compared to other rural videos you have watched, what do you think is unique about this content creator’s video? Do you like this content creator more or less? Why?
2. **Do you think these videos are reflections of real life?**

- ✓ What is rural life to you? How similar or different are these videos from your own understanding, impression, or experience of rural life?
  - ✓ If you had to summarize the image of rural life in these videos using a few words, what would they be?
- 3. There are various representations of rural life in media, such as “Back to Field”, “Become a Farmer”, “My People, My Homeland”, Spring Festival Gala’s GPA, or short videos on Kwai.**
- ✓ Which of these do you think most closely represents how rural life “should be represented”? Why?
  - ✓ If you had to choose one or more of these rural lifestyles to experience, which would you choose and why?
  - ✓ Do these representations of rural life make you more attracted to the countryside, or do they make you appreciate city life even more?
- 4. How do you think the videos convey the idea of rural-urban relationship? Do you agree with the ideas embedded in the video?**
- 5. If you had to summarize the image of farmers in these videos using a few words, what would they be?**
- ✓ How closely do these words align with your own understanding or impression of farmers? Where does your impression come from?
  - ✓ What do you think of the farmers appeared in the series of videos where the content creator goes on veterinary visits (such as delivering a calf or treating a sick cow)?
  - ✓ What do you think of the farmers appeared in the series of videos where the content creator goes to collect unpaid fees?
    - Some viewers commented “life is hard for farmers, so it’s understandable that

they do not pay for the veterinarian”, while others say, “This is an issue of personal responsibility, debts should always be paid”. Which viewpoint do you lean toward, and what is your personal opinion on this issue?

**6. Do the farmers in the video remind you of someone in your own life? How similar or different are they to the people in your life?**

- ✓ Many viewers commented that the farmers in the videos remind them of their own grandparents or parents. Do you feel the same way? What do you think about this kind of reaction?

**7. Who would you recommend these videos to? Why do you think they would enjoy them?**