

## UNSILENCING THE HOME VILLAGE: A DISCURSIVE- -THEORETICAL ANALYSIS OF THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE RURAL IN CHINESE SHORT VIDEOS

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### ABSTRACT

With the rapid rise of digital technologies, the short video, as a low-threshold media form, enables rural subjects to become visible in the public sphere and to realize expression and performance of self-identity. Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory as the theoretical backbone, this study adopted discourse-theoretical analysis on 294 short videos about rural daily life on the Chinese video sharing website Bilibili to discuss how short videos function in the discursive construction of rural areas. The study finds that, first of all, rural people's active media practice dislocates the hegemonic identity formation by demonstrating various dimensions of rural areas. Secondly, we can see three nodal points of the counter-hegemonic discourse on the rural at work: humanized space for daily life, diversified citizenship with dignity, and subjects with initiative and responsibility in national ideologies. Last but not least, although short videos unprecedentedly amplify the voice of the countryside's counter-hegemonic discourse, such resistance is still limited by the inherently unbalanced power relations between the urban and the rural.

**Keywords:** rural China, short video, discursive struggle, discourse theory, DTA

## *Introduction*

Countryside, a space that cannot be ignored, is actually always neglected in China (Fang 2002, p. 1). It is difficult for the rural China to get rid of the fate of being represented and constructed. In the unbalanced urban-rural divide, the countryside has been obscured by the urban discourse for a long time. It is fixed in a subordinate status to urban life through the articulations of “underdeveloped versus developed”, and “them versus us”. With the empowerment of short video, however, rural people start to become subjects of content production, actively presenting their living space and personal identity. As a result, visibility of the home village is activated and the rural as a discursive community gets the right to speak for itself. The rapid rise of rural short video means not only the democratization of media participation but also the changes of the deeply-hidden meaning structure of the identity of the rural.

How do rural people construct their home village through short videos? What kind of cultural meaning and discursive struggle can we see in the perspective of urban-rural relations? In order to answer those questions, this research took Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory as a theoretical starting point. 294 short videos about rural life generated by rural users on the Chinese video-sharing website Bilibili were selected and analyzed via discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA). Through keeping a close eye on the role that media participation on short video platforms plays in unsilencing the countryside, this research aims to further reveal the dynamic, pluralistic, and floating identity construction of rural areas, and to allow a better insight into discursive interaction and power relations between the urban and the rural in the context of digital China.

## *Laclau and Mouffe’s Stance of Discourse*

With being applied in empirical social sciences research in recent decades, the discourse theory developed by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe is increasingly showing its unique insights and capabilities of interpreting various social representations and media cultures. This approach gradually begins to become visible in Chinese communication studies due to Guiquan Xu and Yiming Chen’s (2020) introduction. Distinct from linguistics-based discourse analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory goes beyond the language/non-language and discourse/non-discourse divide. It defines discourse in a macro-textual and macro-contextual way, and considers the world as a result of discursive construction without denying its material dimensions (Doudaki, Carpentier 2019, p. 87). Moreover, its special attention to the competition and conflict between multiple discourses offers a valuable approach to understand media discourse changes and interaction of multiple discourse subjects in the digital era.

### *Articulation and Contingency*

Embedded in a post-structuralism and post-Marxism agenda, Laclau and Mouffe believe social phenomenon and objects get their meanings through discourse. Discourse is a result of articulation, which is defined as “any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice” (Laclau, Mouffe 2001, p. 105). Articulation is a core concept of Laclau and Mouffe’s discourse theory and most of their other concepts are developed around such a process of articulation. Discourses are rooted and shaped in an open field of discursivity which is full of contingent signifiers. They are defined as floating signifiers because they always have different meanings in different discourses. This means that various possibilities of articulations exist in the field of discursivity. The purpose of articulation is to construct some nodal points to partially stabilize the meaning by connecting other signifiers as much as possible to establish a chain of signifiers so as to make them become a part of the network of meaning structure (Smith 2011, p. 134). That determines the contingency and openness of discourse.

Discourse or identity is not stable, and articulatory process is just to set up a temporary structure to partially fix the meaning (Xu, Chen 2020, p. 47). Hence discourse is always at the risk of dislocation, which refers to the phenomenon that “an event or a set of events cannot be represented, symbolized or in other ways domesticated by discursive structure which therefore is disrupted” (Torfing 1999, p. 148). Dislocation could happen at both an intradiscursive and interdiscursive level. Introduction of new elements or changes of old elements inside one discourse, or competition between different discourses for giving meaning to particular events could make meanings dislocated from signifiers (Carpentier 2021, p. 2).

### *Hegemony and Antagonism*

Laclau and Mouffe developed Gramscian thought of hegemony and used it to refer to the status in which nodal points and the discourses behind them obtain social dominance. David Howarth (1998, p. 279) considers the hegemonic practice is a typical form of political articulation which links different identities and makes them get involved in the same project. Since hegemony is essentially a practice of discursive articulation, it is an open system as well. In the view of Laclau and Mouffe (2001, p. 134), a closed system is unable to generate hegemony because all the elements are absolutely fixed and there’s only the repetition of meaning. It is because “others” always exist outside the discourse and keep denying the identity within the discourse that antagonism and hegemony cannot leave each other. And antagonism prevents the full saturation of identity. According to Laclau and Mouffe, each social identity and its identification becomes a venue for diversified articulatory practice and a lot of antagonism exists among them. Such antagonism is constructed through the creation of the chain of equivalence, in which different identities are made equivalent and together suppress another negative identity. The logic of equivalence

tries to include different identities in a common discourse, but it fails in unifying all differences of identities.

The antagonism, together with contingency, determines that hegemonic discourses have to constantly face resistance and struggle around nodal points from other discourses. As Mouffe (2005, p. 18) notes, “Every hegemonic order is susceptible of being challenged by counter-hegemonic practices, i.e. practices which will attempt to disarticulate the existing order so as to install other forms of hegemony”.

### *Short Video and the Construction of the Rural*

#### ***Hegemonic Construction of Rural Area***

As two major forms of settlements in human society, cities and villages always appear in a status of binary opposition. Since Industrial Revolution and Romantic Movement, the representation of the countryside has always been co-constructed and promoted by urban elite groups, including government, artists, media, etc. (Batel 2020, p. 2). In the current Internet ecology in China, the urban residents, as the dominant body of Chinese Internet users, dominate media resources and discourse and insert a set of particular understanding frameworks and aesthetic schemes for various social representations with their own values and cultural awareness (Liu 2020, p. 117). In such unbalanced discursive power relations, the rural is imagined, produced and gazed by a set of institutionalized meaning structures, entering the public as the “silent other” in a passive way under the arrangement of urban discourse. Based on the review and analysis of the latest related literature, we can see urban discourse fixes the identities of the rural mainly around three nodal points at work in the articulatory practice.

The first nodal point is supplement to modern urban life. The rural is often represented as idyll with romantic or natural characteristics, to meet urban residents’ imagination for the ideal lifestyle. Such pastoral utopia is considered as an antidote to urban diseases, and it provides “emotional massage” to relieve modern anxiety (Zeng, Shi 2020, p. 122). In the context of rural revitalization and increasing modernization of rural areas, the countryside on the Internet shows a pre-modern image instead (Cao, Cao 2021, p. 16). This kind of space production has already exceeded the desire structure of the village itself, and it has become more of a space called on by urban discourse at any time (Liu 2018, p. 13).

The second nodal point is localized performance of mainstream ideologies. In mainstream media’s news reports and patriotic TV drama series, the villages which have important events and news value are selected to appear on TV screens. They are called by particular socio-political context or public issues to provide a typical stage for the local interpretation of grand narrative as a background with clear indication but vague details. In news reports such as “looking for the most beautiful rural teachers”, and “building a new Chinese countryside”, the appearance of specific villages serves for a certain ideological purpose to a greater degree (Liu 2018, p. 14).

The third is disadvantaged and marginalized grassroots. In the view of Aifeng Zhang (2019, p. 50), with the rise of bottom literature<sup>1</sup> in 21st century, cultural elites focus on highlighting rural people's poverty and misfortune, and magnifying their alienation and failure in urbanization. In the age of social media, facing class distinction formed by unbalanced economic, political, and cultural capitals, rural netizens have to choose exaggerated, strange and even vulgar forms of body performances to break through the shade of popular discourse and realize the visibility of the rural space on the Internet. "They often project a certain kind of bottom-scape with abnormal value and behaviors" (Liu 2020, p. 118), further consolidating the stigmatization from the city.

### *Unsilencing the Village*

Compared with literature and art which are dominated by urban elites, short videos realize the visual empowerment of rural China with a low-tech threshold and high popularity. Taking one of the leading Chinese short video platforms Kuaishou as an example, according to the report released at Kuaishou annual creator conference in 2021, the scale of platform users who are interested in rural content exceeded 200 million, daily video views of short videos related to the countryside reached 650 million, and the daily volume of likes exceeded 12 million on average (Kuaishou 2021). Short videos are pushing the village into an unprecedented watching network. They have realized the visibility of the village. More importantly, such visibility is not crowned by traditional mainstream discourse. On the contrary, the rural begins to enter the public sphere as a self-conscious and self-contained subject, managing its visibility in accordance with its own rhythm and willingness. Therefore, does it mean the chance of discursive liberation when the silenced village is able to speak for itself? What difference does it make to the existing structure of hegemonic discourse? Those questions have become core issues in the related research on rural short videos.

Yao Sha (2019, p. 81) affirms the objective role played by "Tuwei culture" (土味, a Chinese Internet slang, roughly translated as "rural flavor," is mostly used to describe lowbrow and tacky behaviors and aesthetics of underclasses) in the struggles between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic construction on rural area. And he pinpoints Tuwei culture is a rare discursive confrontation dominated by rural subjects. Such kind of rural culture actually has significant impacts on Chinese Internet pop culture in a wider range. Desheng Wang and Kang Li (2020, p. 10) believe that short videos break the central position of traditional urban media in the rural culture communication.

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1 Bottom literature is an important type of Chinese realistic literature which emerged at the end of the last century and became popular in the 21st century. It mainly focuses on writers' memory of their own ordinary living or reflects the sufferings or troubles of the people from the bottom of society. Farmers, laid-off workers, criminals and migrant workers who move from the countryside to urban areas to make a living in China are usually the main characters in such literary stories.

Those rural video bloggers transform intangible labor and customs into tangible cultural capital, investing diversified meanings into construction of rural identity.

Some scholars also have discussed the extent to which this subjective expression has achieved resistance against the hegemonic identity construction. While affirming more positive and lively images presented by villagers in short videos, Nan Liu and Xiaopu Zhou (2019, p. 108) also pointed out possibilities that such discursive expression could be domesticated and alienated by capital. Tao Liu (2018, p. 15) raised a key question in the discussion about the visibility of rural space in short videos: such kind of short videos are often fragmented, guerrilla-style resistance, so it is difficult to extract a clearly formed logic or structure from them.

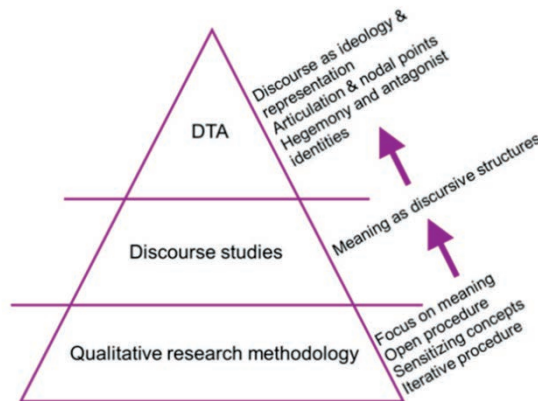
To deepen the understanding of the construction of the rural in short videos, it is necessary to go beyond the macro and static thoughts like “what has been constructed”, and “what is the impact or result of that”, and take a step further into the dynamic observations on the process of meaning generation and interaction, to better investigate how the home village is unsilenced by its community members, and what it means in the construction of the rural in the current urban-rural power structure.

## Research Design

### Methodology

The short videos which are uploaded by rural video bloggers on the video sharing website Bilibili (<https://www.bilibili.com/>), and mainly focus on rural daily life in China were selected as study objects. Discourse-theoretical analysis (DTA) was deployed to investigate video contents.

Graph 1. Pyramid model of DTA (Carpentier 2010)



Source: Carpentier 2010, p. 261

DTA was developed by Belgian scholar Nico Carpentier and Brussels Discourse Theory Group under his guidance. This research group is committed to introducing Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory from political science to the field of media and communication studies. And they strengthened the application of discourse theory through further developing analysis strategies (Van Brussel et al. 2019, p. 3). Graph 1 presents Carpentier's pyramid model of DTA which links discourse theory with the core principle of qualitative research, and establishes the analysis framework by using sensitizing concepts of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. In this way, researchers are able to comprehensively transform the conceptual system of discourse theory into analytical tools, which guide them to complete theoretical abstraction step by step from meaning to discursive structure, and then to ideology/social representation when dealing with qualitative materials.

At present, DTA has come into use in different areas, including discourses in media organizations, identities and practices of media institutions, media rhetoric and communication strategies etc. In China, some scholars are also beginning to try to follow the strategy of DTA to understand and interpret communication issues. And DTA has showed its special value and applicability in the context of China. For example, Guiquan Xu and Zhuang Xiong (2015) investigated diverse meanings of the term "audience" in the existing academic articles. Min Tang (2019) analyzed how the movie "The Founding of an Army (建军大业)" consolidated the hegemony of mainstream ideologies against young netizens. Yiming Chen (2020) illustrated the construction of professional identity of news anchors in two local news programs in Guangdong.

### *Sampling*

The sampling process was conducted via the third-party data analysis platform Newrank. Chinese words "*nongcun*" (农村, *countryside*) (Oxford-FLTRP English-Chinese, Chinese-English Dictionary, p. 530) and "*xiangcun*" (乡村, *village, native place*) (Oxford-FLTRP English-Chinese, Chinese-English Dictionary, p. 815) were selected as keywords to search Bilibili video bloggers. Finally 318 video bloggers were selected. Studies on the identity and trust of bloggers on social platforms indicate that bloggers' personal profiles, which consist of conventional signals, are often not completely true. On the contrary, the assessment signals, which include particular messages and dual social relations, could be used as more reliable information to assist identifying bloggers' self-description (Donath 2007, pp. 233–234). Hence, based on a combination of three conventional signals (video bloggers' ID, profile, certification information) and one assessment signal (video content), irrelevant video bloggers were eliminated. In the meanwhile, the number 30,000 was set as a threshold of subscriber scale to further narrow the scope of samples. Then 20 short video bloggers were selected, including 8 females and 12 males. Samples are diverse in terms of age, region, style, type, etc. Taking latest 15 short videos before August 2021 from 20 selected video bloggers' accounts, finally the research team obtained 294 short videos for discourse analysis.

Table 1. The basic information of selected rural short video bloggers

No.	Account ID (English transl., Chinese alphabet, Chinese character)	Gender	Content	Subscriptions (thousand)	Submission	Average view counts	Average thumbs-up	Average comments of last 5 videos
1	Huanong Brothers Hua Nong Xiong Di 华农兄弟	Male	Food, daily life	6437	504	2142857	105752	3296
2	Xiaoge in Western Yunnan Dian Xi Xiao Ge 滇西小哥	Female	Food, daily life	934	346	255867	16936	914
3	A Village Teacher's Diary Xiang Cun Jiao Shi Ri Ji 乡村教师日记	Female	Education, daily life	672	136	735294	39397	2322
4	Uncle Rural Gourmet Xiang Cun Shi Shu 乡村食叔	Male	Food	264	525	101190	3124	143
5	Xiaoqi from Sichuan Shu Xiao Qi 蜀小漆	Female	Daily life	251	186	247376	10629	667
6	Xiao Mo from Zhuang Village Zhuang Xiang Xiao Mo 壮乡小莫	Male	Daily life	151	854	74712	3800	150
7	Crocodile Brother Nong Chang E Yu Ge 农场鳄鱼哥	Male	Cultivation, food	138	118	150169	7051	158
8	Ajiutong's Spring A Jiu Tong De Chun Tian 阿九筒的春天	Male	Food, leisure	123	141	111418	9773	428
9	Magician Xiaodong Mo Shu Shi Xiao Dong 魔术师晓东	Male	Leisure	121	1519	26060	288	29
10	Foodie in Deep Mountains Shen Shan Chi Huo 深山吃货	Male	Food, daily life	113	527	37814	2285	238
11	Wenshisi's Rural Make-up Xiang Cun Mei Zhuang Wen Shi Si 乡村美妆问十四	Female	Makeup	111	18	308333	24222	864
12	Villager Wukuang Nong Cun Ren Wu Kuang 农村人武狂	Male	Martial arts	109	116	284086	14474	125
13	Xiao Dai in Rural Chongqing Yu Xiang Xiao Dai 渝乡小代	Male	Daily life	91	1269	34552	1955	169.4



No.	Account ID (English transl., Chinese alphabet, Chinese character)	Gender	Content	Subscriptions (thousand)	Submission	Average view counts	Average thumbs-up	Average comments of last 5 videos
14	Grandma Pan Pan Lao Lao 潘姥姥	Female	Food	75	220	110018	5473	34.2
15	Homesickness of Mount Wuyi Wu Yi Xiang Chou 武夷乡愁	Female	Food, farm work	60	104	57413	2894	11.4
16	Yulin Grandma Yu Lin A Po 玉林阿婆	Female	Food	47	89	40562	2787	425.4
17	Grandpa Amu A Mu Ye Ye 阿木爷爷	Male	Wood craft	46	57	69649	2421	249.4
18	Xiaoyu's Forest Xiao Yu De Sen Lin 小雨的森林	Female	Food, lifestyle	46	163	21828	890	30.2
19	Akai from Countryside Nong Cun A Kai 农村阿凯	Male	Food, daily life	42	55	227836	3055	6.6
20	Second Brother Tiewa Tie Wa Er Di 铁娃二弟	Male	Comedy	35	124	66839	3742	19.6

Source: own study

**Coding and Analysis**

Based on the general principles of grounded theory, the research group coded all the selected video content. The coding process was carried out by the two authors after training. In order to reduce the impact of the authors' subjectivities on coding, they discussed the coding criteria over and over again with reference to research questions and sensitizing concepts of Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. And coding criteria was finally determined when the difference between both sides was not significant.

Before the formal coding, the two authors first randomly selected 20 samples, coded those videos separately, and then conducted intercoder reliability test via Holsti's method (cited in Wang 2011, p. 14). According to the formula of percentage agreement:  $PAo = 2A / (N1 + N2)^2$ , the test result was 0.92. That meant that both coders' decisions on the coding of 20 samples were consistent.

2 In Holsti's formula, A represents the number of consensus decisions between the two coders. N1 and N2 represent the number of decisions respectively made by the first coder and the other. The result PAo represents the percentage of the agreement between the two coders.

After that, the two authors watched and coded short video samples one by one, to dig out logic relations between literature and samples, and media content and the construction of the rural. Research groups sorted out 119 valuable nodes, and finally extracted core themes through axis coding and selective coding, forming the main body of research findings.

Table 2. Coding and nodes

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding	Core issues	
Self-shot (32), no editing, no packaging, no soundtrack (29), no clear narrative logic (9)	Original	Visual presentation and aesthetic experience	Multiple media practice	
Upbeat soundtrack (24), Internet pop elements (21), posed shots (20), vertical screen (17), soothing soundtrack (13), close up shots (13), distant shots (13), blockbuster-style video making (11), scenery shots (10), aerial shots (7), sense of variety show (5), slow motion (3), color grading (3), time-lapse (1)	Professional packaging			
Fields (35), mountains (17), orchards (12), country roads (12), rivers (11), paddy fields (10), ponds (9), villages (5), lakes (5), springs (5), terraces (4), raining in the mountain (3), flowers (3)	Natural environment	Space construction		
Yard (20), interior of house (15), school (13), county (11), rental house (9), farm (6), classroom (6), kiosk (5), adobe house (5), wet market (5), square (5), express service point (3), restaurant (4), night market (3), park (3), factory (3), supermarket (2), hatchery (1), barber shop (1)	Social environment			
Chatting in dialect (32), recording life (14), teaching (13), visiting neighbors (9), telling personal experience (8), carpentry work (8), children playing (8), family's or friends' interaction (7), tourism promotion (6), making up and taking photos (5), banquet (5), moving house (4), grocery shopping (4), taking part in folk activities (3), yard decoration (3), doing laundry (2), swimming (2), fashion show (1)	Daily activities	Practice show		Re-articulation of the rural subject's identity
Cooking (94), eating (91), picking (37), agricultural science (21), catching (20), butchering (14), feeding animals (9), hoeing (7), fishing (6), searching food in the wild (4), personal safety (2), releasing captive animals (2), planting flowers (2), picking and roasting tea leaves (2), brewing wine (1), collecting honey (1), making tofu (1), squeezing peanut oil (1)	Agricultural activities			

Open coding	Axial coding	Selective coding	Core issues
Farm owners (20), teachers (16), chefs (16), farmers (5), carpenters (2), magicians (1)	Diverse occupations	Subject identity	Re-articulation of the rural subject's identity
Smiling faces (45), dialogue in dialect (32), skilled craftsmanship (24), sweating (10)	People's state		
Do not litter (3), danger warning signs (2)	Environmental protection	Mainstream ideology	
Rural education (14), caring left-behind children (14), rural revitalization (10), making fortune and getting rich (5), encouraging women to pursue beauty and love (4), disaster relief and assistance (2), exposing gambling scams (1)	Social responsibility		
Strength show (15), weird and rustic dressing (11), absurd performance (5), hitting on grills (3), begging and cheating (2), becoming sworn brothers (1)	Novelty seeking	Alternative performance	
Telling jokes (8), <i>hanmai</i> (a Chinese rap-like performance) (3), social shake (a recently popular dance in China) (4)	Internet culture		
Advertising for home-grown produce (4), forwarding and doing a lottery (1)	Self-branding	Business capital	
Commercial advertising implantation (8), linkage with other video bloggers (6)	Content monetization		

Source: own study

## Research Findings

### *Dislocating Urban Construction of the Rural Via Multiple Media Practices*

Driven by rural video bloggers' participation, short videos take aim at reactivating the "overflowed meanings" of the rural as a signifier to weaken the hegemonic articulation of its identity. Villagers' multiple media practices introduce more dimensions of the rural space that can hardly be seen in urban discourse, thus dislocating the rural identity by highlighting "non-closure", "openness" of the signifier of the countryside itself. They remove the aura of centrality and universality from this signifier by demonstrating that it is deeply diverse and particular, trying to undermine how the urban define the blogger's home village. From the observation and analysis of the video content, we can see this dislocation mainly works in two ways.

The first is diversified visual presentation and aesthetic experience. The openness and accessibility of the Internet platform allows rural subjects to enter the field of content production. Whether they are professionals or amateurs, they record their daily life in their own way.

On the one hand, some video bloggers present their rural life through selfie videos without editing and soundtrack, to guide the viewers to enter their living space and experience picking, fishing, planting, wine making, etc. Take video blogger “Xiao Dai in Rural Chongqing” (渝乡小代), for example, he uses his mobile phone to record moments of his daily life like helping the elder neighbor transport corns, shopping with wife and children, buying baby fish online. He doesn’t have any professional skills in shooting, so his videos are rough, even not stable sometimes. One short video titled “Life is bitter but we are sweet. My wife and mother cook dinner together and wait for me after work. Their relationship is so harmonious.” (生活很苦但我们很甜, 婆媳两一起煮晚餐等待下班的人, 关系好融洽), simply recorded the process of their cooking. Netizens commented that they were “healed by Xiaodai once again” and “people who live hard can live happily anywhere”.

On the other hand, we can also see that some short videos are generated in a completely professional way. The video bloggers like “Xiaoge in Western Yunnan” (滇西小哥), and “Xiaoyu’s Forest” (小雨的森林) largely make use of drones, slow motions, and close-ups to craft rural landscape. The well-designed close-up of agricultural tools, green leaves with water drops, insects on crops, pictures of eating outside the adobe house, and picking and tasting litchi in the orchard, demonstrate the beauty of the modern rural life in detail. The landscape of the rural, together with the knowledge of folklore and history, and the introduction of natural species, are attracting viewers to actively explore the rural by themselves both online and offline.

The second is multisensory self-writing of villagers. Through short video, rural people obtain the right of being seen and being recognized, which was interpreted as “visibility” by Daniel Dayan. In the view of Dayan (2013, p. 139), such visibility includes the right to be seen, the right to be seen in their own way, and the right to give others visibility. The aesthetics of short videos lies on sensory rhetoric. In addition to visual presentation, auditory dialects are the most direct expression of villagers’ self-writing. As a typical mode of discourse, language embodies people’s personal expression of cultural emotions. Different languages, voices and tones are all the real experience of peoples’ emotional participation (Song 2019, p. 162). There are a lot of dialect dialogues in rural short videos. “Local accent” is the iconic symbol of local characteristics, which can immediately bring viewers into the most daily scenes in the village and make them experience interactive communication between relatives, friends, and neighbors.

Those diversified expressions, all refer to the countryside as a complex issue instead of a fixed image or meaning structure merely developed from value orientation of the urban masses. The dislocation of short videos dissolves the previous fixation of hegemonic discourse and makes the meanings of the rural elements float again, creating possibilities for the re-articulation in villagers’ media practices.

### *Re-articulation of the Rural Subject's Identity*

While dislocating the existing meaning structure, the short videos about rural China also try to fix the rural in a different way. Three main nodal points are generated to re-articulate different elements to represent a new vision of rural area.

#### (1) Humanized space for daily life

In the rural short videos, not only the static panorama of the countryside and natural scenery are displayed, but the dynamic interaction between relatives, friends and neighbors also gets represented. Ranging from traditional folk activities including weddings, funerals and clan sacrifices, to daily cooking, farming, and chatting in the fields are all fragments of rural people's lives, containing a strong local custom, especially through language and body. For example, the video blogger "Xiaoge in Western Yunnan (滇西小哥)" invited the elderly and children to be guests at home and they all ate happily. The elderly are considered to be the sustainers of the rural culture, while the children are the successors of the rural cultural heritage (Zhao, Sha 2018, p. 38). The prominence of people's image is a necessary strategy of discourse construction, which can better integrate the subject individual and the overall rural culture.

Space and behavior are also important elements in the discursive re-articulation. As necessary conditions for rural subjects' activities, those elements manifest the humanized and warm interpersonal relations in rural China. In rural short videos, the convenience of modern life and the self-sufficiency of farming life are blended in rural life. No matter if it is in agricultural work or daily life, rural people's hard work highlights their role as the host of the village. The mutual visit and assistance between relatives, friends, or neighbors depict another picture of the village which is full of warmth and trust.

#### (2) Confident and dignified citizenship

Affected by multiple factors such as history and economy, the rural areas have been in a state of "stigmatization" for a long time. Goffman (2009, p. 28) believes that stigma is a social feature that damages its owner's identity, social credibility, or social value in daily communication and social interaction. Rural people are labeled with negative labels such as low literacy, impolite behaviors, etc. As a result, the underdeveloped rural areas need to be reformed for further civilization.

In order to combat such stigmatization, rural people continue to construct their self-cognition mainly through two aspects: clarifying their belonging and expecting to be recognized. Firstly, the video bloggers affirm their identities confidently. Like "Hello everyone, I am your friend who would like to make the whole village become beautiful", "Hi, I am Qierwa"<sup>3</sup>, etc., such expressions directly indicate their identities and make it clear that they belong to the village. Secondly, they try

3 One blogger's name. It has strong rural character in the context of Chinese.

to integrate their own emotions and values into the video content. For example, the video blogger “A Village Teacher’s Diary” (乡村教师日记) is a village teacher. She tells stories about herself and her students most of which are left-behind children through recording what is really happening every day at the village school, like teaching in the classroom, having lunch with students, tutoring students’ homework after school, etc. And she attaches her slogan “Attention to the rural education and care for the left-behind children”. Similarly, there are multiple professional identities we can see in our samples, such as a carpenter who is committed to promote traditional Chinese woodwork, a farmer who is enthusiastic about public welfare, and a magician who exposes the scam of the gaming table. They actively contribute for building beautiful homeland and actively participate in public issues in a wider range. Those video bloggers construct a confident and dignified citizenship, and consciously seek to connect themselves with the society by highlighting their role as members of the society as well as their social responsibilities and obligations.

### (3) Subjects with initiative and responsibility in national ideologies

Those video bloggers who come from the rural also actively link themselves with national ideologies like rural revitalization, and emphasize their subjective role and agency in rural construction and socialist modernization

Issues relating to agriculture, rural areas, and farmers, have always been the focus of China’s strategic deployment and reform. Accelerating the modernization of rural agriculture and allowing farmers to live a better life are important parts of the national ideology. 2018 was the first year of the implementation of China’s “rural revitalization” strategy. Rural e-commerce promoted by digital technology has brought new dynamics and carriers to rural revitalization. It is in such a macro context that short videos are ushering in a boom. In short videos, villagers embed their personal lives in the national development strategy and look for their special position in the grand context. By conspicuously echoing national ideologies, these video bloggers emphasize their positions as the owner of the countryside and backbone for rural modernization, so as to combat the marginalization posed by the urban discourse.

Moreover, some video bloggers such as the “Huanong brothers” (华农兄弟) and “Crocodile Brother” (农场鳄鱼哥) have begun to achieve content monetization. With the use of short videos, some of them successfully expand their e-commerce business and others get profit from advertisement revenue share. For example, “Crocodile Brother” advertises for its own e-commerce brand in short videos, directly promoting self-produced agricultural products such as canned meats, crocodile leather bags, and fresh vegetables and fruits. Closely integrated with e-commerce and logistics sectors, short videos provide farmers with new chances to make money and more new ideas for diverse and effective rural construction.

### *Antagonism and Hegemony in Rural Area*

“Hegemony” is a core topic of post-Marxist discourse analysis. Any political project attempts to weave and integrate different discourses to realize the organization and dominance of a field of meaning, thereby fixing the meaning of the object and the identity of the subject in a specific way (Howarth, Stavrakakis 2000, p. 15). In terms of discourse, rural short videos are expressed from the standpoint of rural subjects, but the viewers mainly come from the urban area. The presentation of the countryside is influenced by the logic of urban discourse under the “gaze”, which inevitably leads to a struggle for hegemony between rural and urban discourse.

#### (1) Deconstruction of urban civilization

The mass media based in the city tend to impose the otherizing of the countryside in its discursive construction of the latter (He 2010, p. 79). Urban discourse often overlooks the rural with a superior attitude. It has the right to define aesthetics and also monopolizes the rules for entering public space. However, short videos provide possibilities for ordinary people to participate in media content production. Thus, rural subjects could take the initiative to engage in anti-hegemonic practice to fight back against urban civilization. In many short videos, the rural environment and architecture are the main background, but fashionable elements with an obviously urban style are incorporated, such as fashion shows on the country road or imitation of sitcoms about urban life. The contrast in such scenes makes short video content funny and dramatic. Rural subjects make use of rural culture and creatively transform it to achieve a cultural collision. In this process, a cultural spectacle is gradually formed in rural space.

Some video bloggers directly point out the difference between urban and rural areas. Like video blogger “Wenshisi’s Rural Make-up” (乡村美妆问十四), for example, who is a makeup artist and her name is Juanzi. Juanzi comes from a rural area and makes videos to record her makeup process for women in the village who haven’t done it on their own for a long time. Everyday work at the stove and in the farmland makes their skin dark and wrinkled. But Juanzi hopes to show their feminine beauty through applying her professional and careful makeup on them. In the video, Juanzi also stated that she “encourages women to love themselves more”, “beauty does not belong exclusively to the city. Everyone is simple and kind. Everyone is eager to be beautiful”, “some brands feel that the countryside is too rustic, so I feel very uncomfortable”, etc. Cities often put rural areas in an unequal position through various “invisible hegemony”. But now more and more rural people are beginning to struggle against this hegemony and break the inherent social cognitive framework through the form of short videos.

## (2) Limited resistance due to power inequality

Although these short videos are actively competing for the dominance of construction of the rural, their resistance is still limited. At present, urban netizens still have the advantage in economic, cultural and discourse aspects. Such inequalities are also reflected in rural short videos. In order to satisfy urbanites' cognitive imagination and aesthetic expectations for the beauty of nature, some short videos try to exaggerate the positive side of the countryside as much as possible through amplifying the leisure and peace the rural life while concealing its backwardness. As can be seen from the content of short videos, nearly 70% of the cases are related to food and they show the the whole picking and cooking process in detail. However, the counterparts that truly describe rural people's living conditions as well as their way of life are relatively fewer. To some extent, the solidified content and mode of filming restrict the rural video bloggers' creativeness. The performance within the established narrative framework will inevitably not be able to break away from the existing norms, and that will lead to the problem of homogenization over time. For example, several short videos all record the process of catching crabs with chicken intestines in the mountains or forests, which is unfamiliar and new to the viewer for the first time but will lead to aesthetic fatigue after more times.

Moreover, the geographical background in most of the short videos is vague. They just show different kinds of activities in the rural without specifying the actual location of the village. That also reflects their media practice is limited in the existing hegemonic framework in some degree. For example, the video blogger "Xiaoyu's Forest" (小雨的森林) does not give any information about where the village is located or what is her identity. She looks like a returned urbanite and renovates an old house in a small village. The interior of the house is filled with modern furniture and decorations. The blurred geographic background does not strengthen the authenticity of rural life, but rather suggests a deliberate pursuit of the so-called the sense of the natural, which is obviously not what the rural discourse truly wants to convey. In addition, there are also some eye-catching and vulgar short videos existing, such as splitting durian with bare hands, strange and rustic dressing, twerking and other sexually suggestive dance moves.

According to the above discussion, we can see the subjects reproduce the image of the countryside through various symbols and elements in rural short videos. Such kind of media practice itself contains the confrontation between the urban and rural discourse. Constrained by economic, cultural, political and other elements, the negotiation and resistance of discursive hegemony will be a long-term process. The countryside needs to find its stage in the historical contexts and daily practices.



### *Conclusions and Discussion*

Starting from Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory, the research deployed discourse-theoretical analysis on 294 short videos about rural China, to investigate dynamic construction of the identity of the rural in short videos and the struggles between hegemonic discourse and counter-hegemonic discourse. First of all, the short video practice empowered by technology has diversified the visual presentation and aesthetic experience. And it also makes multi-sensory self-writing possible. Those videos enable rural bloggers to undermine how the urban discourse fixes the rural in the articulatory process by activating the floating meanings of rural identity. Secondly, the countryside as a discursive community completes (or tries to complete) the re-articulation of its identity around three nodal points: humanized space for daily life; diversified citizenship with dignity; subjects with initiative and responsibility in national ideologies. Last but not least, although short videos unprecedentedly amplify the voice of the countryside's counter-hegemonic discourse, the deep-rooted power inequality between the urban and the rural still makes such resistance limited.

Shooting and sharing short videos gives rural people an unprecedented opportunity and venue to tell their own stories with their own voice, satisfying their desire for self-writing and self-exhibition of their identity. That also draws a bright vision that rural subjects have chances to challenge and resist the urban discursive hegemony. However, we should also be aware that such unequal confrontation will still exist for a long time, and discursive construction of rural short videos is constantly fluctuating and changing, too. In addition, there also exist some limitations in this study. The process of selection and coding of cases can be further refined. And a long-time, continuous observation of short videos is also needed so that we can get a more comprehensive understanding of the development of such media practice and its dynamic impacts on the construction of the rural.

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## STRESZCZENIE

**Niech rodzinna wioska przemówi. Dyskursywno-teoretyczna analiza konstruktów wsi w krótkich chińskich filmach wideo**

Krótkie video jako niskoprogowa forma medialna, pozwala podmiotom wiejskim zaistnieć na arenie publicznej i urzeczywistnić ekspresję i działania tożsamościowe dzięki szybkiemu rozwojowi technologii cyfrowej. W badaniu wykorzystano analizę dyskursu w 294 krótkich filmikach o codziennym życiu na wsi publikowanych na chińskiej stronie internetowej do udostępniania filmików (*Bilibili*), aby wyjaśnić, w jaki sposób krótkie filmy działają w dyskursywnej konstrukcji obszarów wiejskich. Autorzy czerpią z teorii dyskursu Laclau i Mouffe jako podstawy teoretycznej. Przede wszystkim badanie ujawnia, że aktywna praktyka medialna mieszkańców wsi zakłóca formowanie hegemonicznej tożsamości, ujawniając liczne cechy regionu wiejskiego. Po drugie, w działaniu widoczne są trzy punkty węzłowe kontrhegemonicznego dyskursu na temat wsi: zhumanizowana przestrzeń do życia codziennego, zróżnicowane obywatelstwo z godnością oraz podmioty z inicjatywą i odpowiedzialnością w ideologii narodowej. Wreszcie, pomimo faktu, że filmy krótkometrażowe wzmocniły głos kontrhegemonicznej retoryki wsi, taka opozycja jest jednak ograniczona przez z natury nierówne relacje władzy między miastem a wsią.

**Słowa kluczowe:** wiejskie Chiny, krótkie video, walka dyskursywna, teoria dyskursu, DTA