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RURAL WOMEN’S CYCLE OF BITTERNESS ON SHORT-VIDEO PLATFORMS IN CHINA

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Background

In recent years, short-video platforms such as Douyin and Kuaishou, have emerged as one of the most popular media in China. They not only serve as spaces for entertainment, expression and connection but also as significant avenues for economic opportunities, particularly for rural women – a historically invisible and marginalised demographic. These platforms operate on profit-driven models, generating revenue through advertising, livestreaming, and e-commerce. To sustain engagement, they incentivise content creation and collaborate with government departments to promote rural content. These economic and political aspirations shape how rural women navigate the platform, influencing both their participation and the opportunities available to them.

For many rural women, short-video platforms provide a vital source of income, whether through livestreaming, e-commerce, and brand partnerships. However, rather than seamlessly embracing the aspirational narratives embedded in these platforms, many rural women often describe their experiences as “bitter” [苦] (meaning hardships and suffering). This bitterness is reflected both in their self-representation on short-video platforms and in their broader engagement with them. The bitter experience contrasts with the promise of digital success, revealing a rupture between the platforms’ ideals and rural women’s lived realities. This paper focuses on a key finding from a multi-year project on rural women’s self-representation and asks: why, on platforms that embody the aspirations of both the state and individuals, are rural women bitter?

The study

To better understand rural women’s self-representation and their experiences with short-video platforms, I conducted textual analysis of 30 rural female content creators’ videos and livestreams, as well as immersive fieldwork over three months, including in-depth interviews and participant observation with 10 rural women in East China.

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Findings and Analysis

During interviews, a recurring theme was the affect “bitterness” and the cycle of “spitting out” and “eating” bitterness. My interlocutors frequently “spat out” bitterness - complaining about life challenges and “eat” bitterness - enduring pain. In Chinese, the word bitter extends its meaning beyond a negative gustatory experience to encompass physical and mental discomfort, including pain, sorrow, hardship, and existential awareness of suffering.

The cycle of bitterness has historical roots. In Mao era, rural women were encouraged to “spit out bitterness” by publicly expressing hardships and injustices endured in the feudal society. Meanwhile, they were particularly expected to “eat more bitterness” by contributing more productive labour for state’s socialist future. Bitterness was closely associated with Chinese modern nation-building, viewed as a remnant of feudal society embodied by rural women - an obstacle to be eliminated for a more egalitarian socialist future.

This cycle recurs in the post-reform era, now reframed within a developmentalist narrative that translates rural poverty as a marker of underdevelopment within the Global South’s modernisation agenda after the Cold War (Escobar, 1995; Pigg, 1992). Rural women are seen as embodying backwardness, expected to “eat bitterness” by contributing their underpaid, docile labour to fuel urban development. The narrative of bitterness has since evolved, merging economic responsibility with ideals of self-determination and ambition (Griffiths & Zeuthen, 2014). Meanwhile, consumerism emerges as a coping mechanism, offering rural women a pathway to forget, escape or mitigate bitterness through consumption (Rofel, 2007).

Now short-video platforms have emerged not only as a pathway to self-development, encouraging rural women to cultivate skills that enhance their quality(suzhi) within a modernising economy; but also a technological promise of “sweetness”, of a “better life” with potential economic benefits for rural women. On these platforms, they are not just backward rural women but also aspirational entrepreneurs.

To succeed in entrepreneurship on short-video platforms, rural women must develop self-branding skills to achieve visibility. However, visibility is not neutral; as Banet-Weiser (2013) argues, structural inequalities shape it by designating certain identities and practices as “brandable” and “worthy” of attention. This means that rural women must carefully navigate and even modify aspects of their self-representation to fit the criteria of what is deemed “brandable” in order to be seen. The issue of brandability is also deeply intertwined with the ambivalence of authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Self-branding aims to project a relatable, authentic image to connect with audiences, but this authenticity often involves performative, deliberately constructed acts. The tension here lies in the fact that rural women are expected to present an “authentic” self that resonates with viewers, yet this authenticity must be curated to fit standards of brandability - standards that are often shaped by structural inequalities.

The tension is reflected in rural women's cycle of bitterness on short-video platforms. When short-video platforms have become essential for them to sustain livelihoods within a system that offers limited alternative options, they have to spit out their bitterness to validate their authentic rural female identity. However, these bitter experiences are not merely narratives but integral parts of their lived realities. The very act of packaging and presenting bitterness for self-branding cancels out the rawness of their bitterness. The economic rewards of short-video platforms further justify this cancellation, intensifying the bitter paradox: to survive in both digital economy and real world, rural women have to package their genuine struggles into a commodity to form their self-brand.

During this process, bitterness includes both brandable and unbrandable aspects. Structural issues like the rural-urban divide are seen as unattractive slogans for self-branding, while rural identities can be branded through virtues linked to poverty alleviation and rural prosperity, aligning with urban expectations. Similarly, gender inequalities like unequal pay and devaluation of care labour are unmarketable, but concepts of self-empowerment in a postfeminist narrative are brandable. The unbrandable aspects of rural women's bitterness, tied to structural inequalities, cannot be fully expressed on short-video platforms. Even if expressed, they are often misunderstood as personal virtues tied to self-development. This became clear when I explored the comment sections under my interlocutors' videos. Many urban audiences struggle to grasp the reality of rural women's suffering, especially when presented on short-video platforms. Furthermore, most of the videos require extensive editing - a lot of their labour process and bitter reality has been chopped into pieces, stitched together and compressed into "less-than-one-minute" and "sanitised" clips. This further reinforces the misunderstanding of rural women's bitterness as self-branded in their videos.

The structural issues therefore remain intact, the unbrandable bitterness, thus, still has to be swallowed by rural women. Walking through these rural towns, I noticed a harsh demographic divide: few young people were around, with the majority being elderly and children. Many young rural individuals are drawn to the promise of urban dream, seeking better opportunities in larger cities. This is compounded by the devaluation of agricultural labour, along with inadequate welfare support. This has left rural areas with broken homes and an abandoned population in need of care. Rural women like my interlocutors often find themselves shouldering the responsibility of caregiving. Inspired by Butler's theory of "grievability" (2010), I see bitterness as a form of affective governance closely tied to social conditioning, intersecting with their personal feelings. Paradoxically, it also serves as a means for these women to monetise the very affects associated with their hardships and marginalised status in the social order through the attention economy.

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