

THE RECONFIGURATION OF RURAL PUBLIC AUTHORITY: VILLAGE OFFICIALS AND AFFECTIVE GOVERNANCE ON DOUYIN IN CHINA

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This article examines how village officials in China mobilise affective governance as a platform-mediated technique for reconfiguring rural public authority on Douyin. Drawing on interviews with 11 village officials and an iterative analysis of 220 short videos and related livestreaming practices, it shows how village officials mobilise intimacy, self-sacrifice, and public-minded authenticity to perform three interrelated functions: constructing everyday public authority, rendering policy work and governance performance legible to local publics, and framing commercial practices as public service. The article argues that platformisation reshapes the conditions under which grassroots state power becomes visible, relatable, and publicly recognisable in rural acquaintance-based society. In this process, village officials increasingly operate through a hybrid logic that combines bureaucratic authority with influencer-style self-presentation. While such practices can enhance the visibility and responsiveness of grassroots governance, they also generate tensions around performative intimacy, the commercialisation of public service, and the remaking of professional authority.

KEYWORDS Douyin; grassroots governance; affective governance; public authority; rural China

Introduction

Within China's state power structure and grassroots governance system, village-level organisations serve as the terminal nodes connecting the Party Central Committee with rural communities, consistently operating at the forefront of the nation's transformation in modern governance. According to the National People's Congress (NPC), village Party organisations differ from strictly defined governmental administrative bodies, and serve as grassroots self-governance units of the Party in rural areas (2025). Their head officials at each level assume dual roles as state agents and local community leaders (NPC 2025).

This paper uses the term “village officials” (cunguan) to encompass both traditional village cadres (the grassroots leaders within the Party-state hierarchy) and College Graduate Village Officials (CGVO, the younger generation of professionalised

administrators) (He and Wang 2017), reflecting their converging roles in the digital governance landscape. Nowadays, short-video platforms have gradually become important spaces for rural expression and grassroots governance. Through algorithmic recommendations and traffic-support mechanisms, these platforms have shaped creative trends on rural life, agricultural production, and local culture (Li 2020; Zhang 2023). Interestingly, rural content creators now include not only ordinary farmers and returning entrepreneurs but also grassroots governance actors (Zhao et al. 2023). Many village officials actively create personal accounts and participate in content production. By posting policy interpretations, village affairs updates, and e-commerce livestreams on Douyin, they have established a “new village official” practice that combines governance functions with content creation. Some of them have amassed large followings and become internet celebrities. By December 31, 2025, videos tagged with #village-officials had attracted approximately 160,000 participants, with total views reaching around 1.8 billion.

However, China’s political system significantly differs from Western contexts. In Western nations, political figures utilise personal social media accounts as standardised campaign and public relations tools (Loader et al. 2016; Enli 2017). However, there is a unique Chinese phenomenon. Senior-level political communication in China consistently maintains a high degree of solemnity and depersonalisation (Stockmann 2013). Senior officials at the provincial and municipal levels typically maintain an image of power that is distant from the public to preserve the prestige and mystery of the political system (Repnikova and Fang 2018; Stockmann 2013). Their political representation is tightly circumscribed by institutionalised grand narratives and the collective will (Zhao 2008). Ordinary citizens largely lack direct social channels to engage with officials at this level. Moreover, Chinese government social media exhibits a pronounced organisational rather than individualised character (Zou 2023). In this context, village-level officials at the grassroots level appear to be the rare state agents permitted and encouraged to showcase personalised administrative details in the digital space.

To understand grassroots governance in China’s rural areas, it is essential to examine Fei Xiaotong’s discussion of Chinese rural society (1992). Fei argued that governance in traditional rural society did not rely on cold legal rules or violent compulsion, but was deeply embedded in the affective logic of familiar social networks and the traditional order of ritual governance. Unlike the modern “rule of law”, traditional Chinese rural society relies more on the “rule of men” or, more accurately, the “rule of ritual” (94). The function of ritual governance lies in maintaining a “society without litigation”, with its core being the establishment of social order upon people’s affective commitment and conscience (100). Elder governance in traditional villages heavily depended on emotional interactions between authorities and villagers, mutual reciprocity, and moral persuasion (115). In this digital era, the relational and moral resources associated with rural acquaintance society could be selectively mediated, translated, and partially rearticulated under platform conditions. Through short videos and livestreams, familiar repertoires of approachability, care, obligation, and service are mediated as the governance mechanism for affective governance.

Building on this perspective, this article understands affective governance as a mechanism through which the relational and moral resources associated with the “rule of ritual” are mediated under contemporary platform conditions. Here, affect is not used as a general label for emotion, but as a governance mechanism through which village officials personalise, moralise, and validate public authority through platform interaction. By examining the Douyin practice of village officials, this article argues that Douyin

reconfigures rural public authority through the affective governance mechanism that enables village officials to construct online authority, make policy work and governance performance publicly visible, and validate the entanglement of public service with commercial practices. The article makes three contributions. First, it shifts attention in digital politics from elite political actors to village officials as everyday state actors whose authority is made visible through online practice. Second, it shows how the traditional “rule of ritual” is mediated, translated and partially rearticulated in online affective governance. Third, it shows how Douyin reshapes the role of village officials, who increasingly combine administrative responsibilities with personalised, interactive, and influencer-style self-presentation, revealing how digital platforms transform the public life of state power beyond liberal models of the public sphere.

Literature Review

Political Communication in the Digital Transformation

Political communication is mainly about the creation and circulation of the messages, interpretations, and discourses of public power, governance, and collective affairs (Norris 2004; McNair 2017; Perloff 2021). Early research largely examined the role of media in shaping political attitudes and behaviour to support citizen participation and the legitimacy of political rule (Norris 2004). In the context of media fragmentation, the dynamics of political communication were different. Rather than through dominant outlets and coherent narratives, political messages now communicate through a dispersed but interconnected media environment (Bennett and Iyengar 2008; Van Aelst et al. 2017; Perloff 2021).

Existing Western research focuses on how political actors, such as presidents or political parties, disseminate information, engage in interactions, and construct their images within platform environments (Moffitt 2016; Enli 2017; Enli and Skogerbø 2013; Silva and Proksch 2022). Klinger and Svensson (2015) further explored the “network media logic”, which emphasises connectivity, virality, and immediacy, forcing traditional party communication to submit to platform-based logic. In this process, tech giants are no longer merely distribution channels, but profoundly shape the rules of political communication through their algorithmic distribution mechanisms and data governance capabilities (Kreiss and McGregor 2018; Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan 2013). This technological power increasingly personalises political communication. Many politicians tend to conduct personalised narrative campaigns directly through their own social media accounts (Moffitt 2016; Enli 2017). Meanwhile, visual visibility is important. Visual platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, have become popular spaces for politicians and political participants to shape their personas and frame policy discussions (Farkas and Bene 2021; Cervi et al. 2023).

In the Chinese context, political communication studies have long focused on the relationship between the state, media, and society. During the era of traditional media, mainstream outlets served as propaganda tools for the Party and government. They fulfilled core functions of disseminating Party policies, reflecting public sentiment, and guiding public opinion as the voice of the Party (Stockmann 2013; Zhao 2008). This institutional arrangement resulted in China’s political communication exhibiting pronounced top-down characteristics for an extended period. This type of organised dissemination often places greater emphasis on standardised discourse and authoritative sources (Zhao 2008; Lee 2019). However, the internet and digital media have gradually

generated more complex interactive dynamics in political communication (Esarey and Xiao 2011). Social media has expanded public expression spaces and led to a trend of decentralisation in political discourse and the fragmentation of issues (Lu 2026). At the same time, political communication research has begun to focus on online public opinion, citizen participation, and the state's response to the uncertainties brought by digitalisation (Zou 2023). This transformation is particularly evident in the digital practices of local governments and functional departments, forming the most dynamic field of soft propaganda in current research (Zou 2023; Lu and Pan 2024; Lu 2026). However, Chinese political communication still exists in the tension between authoritarian determination and agency. On one hand, political information disseminated by both national and local governments must adhere to the political systems and norms of the Party-State (Guan 2019; Lee 2019). On the other hand, there is growing diversity and agency within government communication practices (Lu and Pan 2024). What remains less examined is how village officials, as everyday grassroots state actors, use short videos and livestreams to turn routine governance work into visible, interactive, and affectively resonant forms of public authority.

Affective Governance, Publics and the “Rule of Ritual”

Recent scholarship on affective governance shows that power operates not only through rules, institutions, and discourse, but also through the orchestration of feeling. In China-focused research, affective governance has been theorised as a mode of rule that works on the “nervous system” of political life, linking legitimacy to atmospheres of gratitude, sacrifice, and emotional discipline (Sorace 2021). Related studies similarly show that governance is enacted through affective scripts embedded in administration and crisis management: affect has been mobilised to cultivate trust and “good” citizenship (de Blasio and Selva 2021), to redirect public sentiment during the COVID-19 outbreak (Song and Liu 2023), and to organise the emotional display of street-level governance (Tong et al. 2024). Other work extends this perspective by showing how “positive energy” is embedded in urban governance (Xu et al. 2025) and how computational systems modulate ambient affect and public orientation (Wu 2022). Yet this literature remains largely institution-centred. It explains how states govern through feeling, but says less about how governance is publicly enacted through mediated performances addressed to situated publics, especially by local officials whose authority depends on social recognition as well as administrative position (Wu and Chen 2023).

Another body of work shifts attention from governance to the affective formation of publics. Rather than understanding publics primarily through rational-critical deliberation, this scholarship shows how networked publics cohere through storytelling, circulation, and shared intensities of feeling (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012; Papacharissi 2016). Studies of TikTok and other platform environments extend this argument by showing how visibility, virality, and memetic participation assemble unstable and ambivalent issue-based publics (Hautea et al. 2021; Lünenborg and Backes 2025). Related debates on digital publicness further challenge liberal models of the public sphere by showing how crisis, platformisation, polarisation, and affective intensity reshape the conditions under which publics become visible and consequential (Rauchfleisch et al. 2021; Mahmutović and Lovec 2024; Schlesinger 2024; Splichal 2024; Kaluža 2024). Work on China adds an important non-liberal perspective. Social media often generate fragmented rather than unified publics (Shao and Wang 2017), contingent and uneven sub-public spheres (Chen 2022), and forms of publicness shaped as much by platform logics as by state power (Pang et al. 2022). Government-managed social

media and platform governance similarly shows that official online spaces rarely become fully dialogic public spheres (Medaglia and Zhu 2017), and that affect is increasingly folded into broader regimes of platform governance and legitimacy production (Peng 2017; Chen and Shi 2025).

It is therefore necessary to distinguish affective governance from affective publics. Affective publics refer to audience formations and emotional responses generated through comments, likes, shares, livestream interaction, support, scepticism, and collective attention (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2012; Hautea et al. 2021). Affective governance, by contrast, refers to the practices through which governing actors use affect as a technique for producing authority (Sorace 2021; de Blasio and Selva 2021). In this article, comments, platform metrics, and livestream responses are analysed as part of the platform environment through which village officials' authority is displayed, evaluated, amplified, and sometimes contested. This distinction addresses the risk of treating affect as a vague umbrella term and clarifies the article's focus on village officials as grassroots state actors rather than on audience publics as the primary object of analysis. Taken together, these literatures show that affect matters both to governance and to platformised publicness, but they rarely explain how grassroots state actors turn governance into a visible, affectively resonant, and publicly recognised form of authority.

This focus also clarifies the analytic role of Fei's account of rural acquaintance society and the "rule of ritual" (Fei 1992). This article uses the "rule of ritual" as a historical and conceptual reference for understanding the relational and moral resources of rural authority. Under platform conditions, resources such as familiarity, reciprocity, obligation, reputation, and moral persuasion are mediated, translated, and partially rearticulated through short-video visibility, livestream performance, audience interaction, platform metrics, and commercial affordances. Affective governance on Douyin is therefore understood as a platform-mediated reworking of rural relational and moral repertoires in online governance.

Research Methods

This study adopts an iterative multi-method qualitative design with semi-structured interviews, content analysis and non-participatory online observation. The three methods were conducted in parallel sequence, allowing interviews, video analysis and livestream observation to inform one another during data collection (Srivastava and Hopwood 2009). After each interview, I reviewed selected videos from the participant's Douyin account and observed related livestreaming practices. These observations were used to refine later interview questions and coding categories.

This study selected 11 active rural village officials on Douyin as participants. "Village officials" refers to cadres working in village Party committees and village committees. Participants were identified by searching "village officials assisting farmers" (cunguanzhunong) on Douyin and were selected according to three criteria: the account clearly identified the user as a village official; it had sustained public activity related to village affairs, policy promotion, rural development or agricultural sales; and the official agreed to be interviewed. The study did not primarily select participants based on follower count or commercialisation level, but rather focused on whether they had consistently and stably published videos related to grassroots governance. All participants were anonymised, and identifying details such as precise location, age and follower count were obscured (Table 1). Data were retrieved during October and November 2025.

TABLE 1
The 11 participants. To protect their political identities, all participants have been anonymised. Identifiable information such as age and follower counts has also been obscured.

ID	Gender	Age	Followers	Work location
P1	male	30-50	10,000-50,000	Jiangsu Province
P2	male	30-50	above 500,000	Shanxi Province
P3	female	30-50	10,000-50,000	Anhui Province
P4	female	under 30	100,000-500,000	Heilongjiang Province
P5	male	under 30	50,000-100,000	Guizhou Province
P6	female	under 30	10,000-50,000	Gansu Province
P7	female	30-50	50,000-100,000	Zhejiang Province
P8	male	30-50	100,000-500,000	Shandong Province
P9	male	30-50	10,000-50,000	Anhui Province
P10	female	above 50	100,000-500,000	Shanxi Province
P11	female	under 30	10,000-50,000	Hubei Province

This study conducted semi-structured interviews with 11 participants. Interview questions centred on the following aspects: the interviewees’ motivations and processes for political content creation and live-streaming; their understanding of the relationship between village official identity and social media influencer; specific practices in policy communication and public engagement; and live-streaming monetisation strategies. The interview outline was adjusted during the research process according to the analysis of earlier cases. Considering the geographical dispersion of participants and the requests for privacy protection from all interviewees, all interviews were conducted online via voice calls on WeChat or Douyin. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 90 minutes. Analysis proceeded iteratively alongside data collection. After the 11th interview, the interview data were treated as having reached thematic redundancy, as the main themes around approachability, governance visibility, and the tension between public service and e-commerce had recurred across participants and corresponded with patterns identified in the video analysis and livestream observations. The final interviews did not generate substantively new analytic categories. This claim indicates sufficient recurrence for the purposes of this qualitative study.

To analyse short-video practices, I conducted a critical content analysis of 220 public Douyin videos, with 20 videos selected from each participant’s account. The videos were selected through purposive and theoretically informed sampling. Selection focused on videos relevant to the article’s research questions, including self-presentation and intimate identity, policy communication, governance performance, rural public service, village storytelling, livestream promotion and agricultural e-commerce. Purely personal videos with little relevance to rural governance were excluded, while variation in topic, format, posting time and audience response was retained.

Finally, I conducted four months of non-participatory observation of live-streaming activities for 11 participants between October 2025 and January 2026. The period encompassed some representative times for rural e-commerce, such as the Double Eleven e-commerce festival, the winter off-season for agricultural products, and the sales peak period before the Chinese New Year. I did not interact with viewers or make purchases. Observation notes recorded scene setup, products sold, selling methods, forms of address, emotional tone, viewer comments, policy inquiries, references

to public service and visible platform indicators such as likes, viewer numbers and sales-related prompts.

The data were analysed through a manual, iterative coding process in three steps. First, I conducted open coding of videos, livestream observation notes and interview transcripts to identify recurring practices, including intimate address, humour, self-disclosure, hardship narratives, service claims, policy explanation, work display, audience praise or scepticism, livestream selling and references to public service. Second, I compared these initial codes across cases and grouped them into three analytic dimensions: the construction of affective authority, the affective communication of policy work and governance performance, and the framing of commercial practices as public service. Third, I refined these dimensions by comparing platform content with interview accounts and livestream observations. For example, affective authority was coded when village officials used emotional expression, familiarity, care, humour or moral claims to make their official role appear approachable, trustworthy and publicly recognisable. Commercial practices were coded as public-service framing when e-commerce, product promotion or livestream selling was presented as helping farmers, increasing village income, promoting local products or contributing to rural revitalisation.

This study strictly follows research ethics principles. All participants provided verbal consents, and personal information and identifiable content were fully protected throughout the research process.

Findings

The analysis identifies three main dimensions of affective governance on Douyin: the construction of affective authority, the affective communication of policy work and governance performance, and the framing of commercial practices as public service. Together, these dimensions show how affective governance operates as a platformised mechanism through which village officials produce authority in a space shaped by visibility, interaction, metrics, and commerce.

Personalising Authority through Intimate Identity

On Douyin, platform visibility personalises rural public authority by turning village officials' formal administrative identity into an approachable and emotionally recognisable public persona. Although different generations of village officials understand and use Douyin in different ways, their practices share a common logic: affective expression works as a platform-mediated technique for making formal authority visible, familiar, and publicly relatable. Through humour, self-disclosure, everyday storytelling, and narratives of care and responsibility, village officials translate institutional status into public authority that can be seen, felt, and evaluated through platform interactions.

For middle-aged village officials, platform practices are closely tied to anxieties about being left behind by the times. In interviews and video content, several key words were repeatedly mentioned, such as "digital transformation", "keeping up with the trends", and "not falling behind". They view short video production and livestreaming sales as essential tasks. In contrast, young CGVOs tend to view content creation as political ideals and career aspirations. Every CGVO participant expressed in the video, "I hope to 'write' the Shenlun (the standardised policy argumentation for the civil service exam) onto the very soil of my motherland". This statement emphasises their professional goal of

applying learned governance concepts to practical rural development. Such an idealistic expression presents their capabilities and service commitment to a broader audience. One shared:

I'm very grateful to the state for giving young people the opportunity to serve as village officials. I hope I can contribute the vitality and strengths of youth to inject new energy into the village. (P6, CGVO).

Young village officials who face an authority disadvantage due to insufficient practical experience (He and Wang 2017) place greater emphasis on knowledge and culture when shaping their identity. Despite differing generational experiences, they all aspire to build a trustworthy and capable political identity on the platform. Village officials often minimise formal authority symbols in videos and try to appear casual and informal within everyday village life. Scenes show them chatting with villagers in fields, working on farm tasks, participating in leisure activities, or engaging in relaxed conversations on camera. Such content rarely emphasises official positions or institutional roles. Instead, it focuses on shared experiences within familiar village settings to build closeness and belonging. The intimate self-presentation here works as an affective technique through which formal village authority is made visible, approachable, and emotionally recognisable on Douyin.

For instance, one participant regularly cooked meals during lunch breaks and sold them door-to-door at minimal cost to villagers facing hardship. He called himself the son of two hundred villagers. In the interview, he shared:

When I walked around the village in the past, people always called me "leader" or "cadre". But now they like calling me by my nickname, and they always greet me from afar and talk with me as a friend or family member. We've been much closer. (P2, Village Party Secretary)

While the mere change reflected a substantive breakthrough in the historically distanced relationship between people and political actors (Repnikova and Fang 2018). Another affective narrative more explicitly emphasises mission and responsibility. Village officials frequently express emotional judgments about the village's current state in videos, such as concerns over population loss and industrial decline, expectations for future development, and personal commitments to contribute to the village. These expressions are not occasional emotional releases but reappear across multiple videos, gradually forming a stable narrative theme. By consistently emphasising phrases like "I care", "I worry", "I hope", and "I persist", village officials transform their political governance duties into a continuously demonstrated affective investment in the village. This narrative easily evokes collective resonance among audiences and villagers regarding their living conditions. Comments such as "A good official truly cares for the people" and "Thumbs up for the village secretary who puts the people in his heart" appear in nearly every comment section of participating officials' videos.

Thus, Douyin visibility changes the basis of village officials' authority, and institutional position must be repeatedly translated into visible affective commitment. Responsibility, sacrifice, and care are not simply personal qualities but must be performed through videos, livestreams, and audience interaction. This makes authority publicly recognisable, but also unstable. As affect becomes a resource for political

identity and trust, any inconsistency may quickly turn emotional support into anger, disappointment, or ridicule (Papacharissi 2015). P11 captured this pressure: “It was fine at first, but now that villagers and the public know I’m doing this, I have to keep doing it well”.

Visualising Governance Work through Affective Communication

This section shows how Douyin visualises policy work and governance performance into publicly observable content. The Douyin short-video platform features highly visual, narrative, and contextualised content presentation (Bhandari and Bimo 2022). Through village officials’ cameras, grand national strategies are translated into micro-scenarios tied to villagers’ everyday lives.

For instance, videos often introduce and clarify pension insurance topics through conversations with elderly villagers. Fire and flood prevention topics are filmed in rural farm fields. By leveraging platform affordances, village officials translate the abstract and distanced presence of the state into a concrete and affective service presence. For example, by showcasing the everyday operation of an “elderly canteen”, a policy is no longer framed as a set of abstract welfare targets on paper, but becomes a steaming bowl of food and the smiling faces of older residents chatting together. Videos of road repairs similarly replace bureaucratic descriptions of infrastructure construction. These visual strategies make governance performance publicly visible and recast bureaucratic tasks as concrete acts of care and responsiveness. In the videos, village officials strategically adopt more relatable communication styles, such as using local dialects, creative edits, popular background music, or humorous scripts to foster closer connections with villagers during policy communications. Multiple interviewees mentioned consciously avoiding an overly official tone when filming policy explanation videos to prevent creating distance with viewers. For example, one interviewee said:

Before, I broadcast policies in Mandarin from the office, but I had no idea if anyone listened. Now, I use dialect and keep my videos fun. Villagers now feel the content is relevant to their lives and often follow up with questions in the comments. (P4, CGVO)

The shift from the village loudspeaker to the interactive comment section turns grassroots authority from one-way announcement into a visible, responsive, and publicly evaluated practice. In non-participatory observations of village officials’ livestreaming practices, the study found that some livestreamings, such as P3 and P9, conducted daily scheduled sessions to explain specific policies. They functioned as fully open digital government service windows, where village officials answered villagers’ questions about policy details in real time.

The backgrounds of their livestreaming rooms clearly displayed labels such as “Rural Livestream Room”, “Farmer Support Policies”, and “Q&A” (Figure 1). To some extent, this real-time, bidirectional interaction enhances governance transparency. In interviews, all village officials emphasised that villagers or netizens could leave messages, ask questions, or even monitor their work at any time. P1 even stated, “My account is essentially a digital government mailbox”. This interaction makes responsiveness publicly visible.



Figure 1. P3's live streaming room. To protect privacy, identifiable account and location information has been blurred. In the comment section below, viewers inquire about policy details such as pension insurance and farmland subsidies.

Interestingly, the actual audience for this affective policy communication shows a notable geographical and psychological disconnect: its core audience isn't the elderly who are left behind in the village, but rather migrant workers who have been away for years. Interviews reveal that when faced with practical policy issues, the elderly still tend to go directly to the local government office for face-to-face consultation. But for the younger generation working in cities, the village officials' Douyin accounts have become a reliable digital bridge for maintaining hometown connections and accessing political information. They not only seek updates on local infrastructure development or elderly care policies through the videos but also look for traces of their hometown's transformation or even glimpses of their own family members. One participant shared:

Many DMs come from young migrant workers. Some seek advice on rural health insurance while working in cities, and others send screenshots of my videos, saying, "That's my uncle!" They support me and ask for more content. I feel like they really miss home. (P9, Village Party Committee Member)

Their homesickness encourages a virtual return to the village through Douyin. This allows village officials to extend governance beyond the physical village and build

cross-regional digital connections, making grassroots authority visible, and publicly sustained across a wider social space.

On the other hand, the study also found that personal Douyin accounts not only serve as channels for disseminating policies to villagers but are increasingly becoming dynamic digital resumes for village officials aspiring to higher-level political careers. By consistently posting work-related content, officials can showcase their governance achievements in a more intuitive and emotional way. Improvements in infrastructure, expansion of public services, and establishment of educational programs are all transformed into visualisable governance outcomes. Unlike traditional text reports or statistical tables, this presentation visualises the process and emotional investment. Through before-and-after comparisons, storytelling, and public feedback, they create a visible governance. In their comment sections, there are many supports and praises from villagers and netizens, further providing affective endorsement for these achievements. In some cases, viewers actively vouch for officials in comments, sharing support for them (Figure 2).

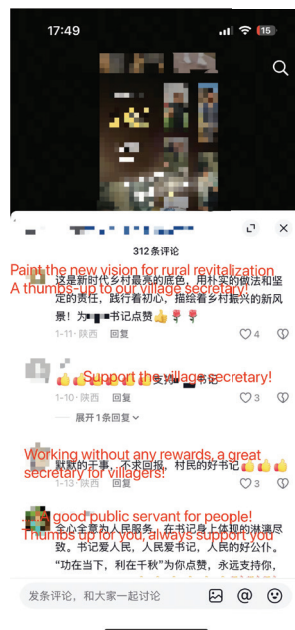


Figure 2. P2's comment section shows support and praise from users. To protect privacy, identifiable account information has been blurred.

This affective response from the public grants social validation to governance achievements on the platform. Although most interviewees stated their content creation was not motivated by career advancement, they acknowledged gaining greater recognition. However, some participants noted that “fame” is not always an advantage:

I am sceptical about its benefits for promotion because leadership styles vary so much. What one leader calls innovative, another might call showboating. (P5, CGVO)

Algorithmic amplification of visible achievements may turn governance performance into affective and political capital, making village officials appear capable and responsive. Yet this capital remains unstable. It may invite scrutiny and metric pressure without necessarily being recognised in formal cadre evaluation.

Framing E-commerce Mobilisation as Public Service

"If traffic has value, I'd rather use it to help farmers increase their income". This line appears in every participant's video. It highlights the primary goal of village officials' content creation is to boost income through live-streaming e-commerce. In this process, economic activity and political communication become closely intertwined, while affective governance connects them by framing commercial practices as public service.

The study found that village officials often choose live-streaming e-commerce as a way to overcome local structural poverty and inadequate infrastructure. In many remote mountain villages, the traditional approach of attracting investment has proven largely ineffective due to geographical isolation, high transportation costs, and labour shortages (Liu et al. 2023). E-commerce has thus emerged as the most cost-effective and accessible way for developing the economy. A CGVO in mountainous regions shared:

Being four hours from the nearest high-speed rail and lacking young labour, conventional industries are out of our reach. E-commerce has become our shortcut. It bypasses these physical constraints with relatively low risk. (P7, CGVO)

Under practical constraints, direct agricultural sales through platforms represent the most cost-effective, operationally feasible, and directly beneficial approach to increasing income. Although they overlap with influencer roles, in their narratives, they differ from other commercial influencers who pursue personal capital (Duffy 2017). These village officials usually frame their livestreaming efforts within an affective and ethical framework of solving problems for the village collective.

Significantly, multiple interviewees repeatedly emphasised during both live streamings and interviews that their sales licenses were registered under the village collective's name, with all related revenues incorporated into the village's collective income (Figure 3). And the earnings from live streaming will be used for infrastructure development, public services, or collective projects. This repeated explanation of fund flow serves as a crucial emotional and moral statement, aiming to consistently position live streaming as part of public affairs rather than personal profit-seeking.

In addition to presenting livestreaming commerce as the public service, affective governance turns familiarity, care, and official credibility into monetisation resources for building consumer trust and encouraging transactions. Through non-participatory observation of 10 participants' live streamings (P6 has not yet engaged in live streaming but mentioned preparations during interviews), the study found that village officials actively try to demonstrate authenticity. They set up their live streamings directly in muddy fruit orchards, crowded workshops, or low-ceilinged houses (Figure 4). Viewers could see the crops' growing environment, villagers' labour processes, and products in their raw state. These authentic production scenes endorsed the goods' natural quality. The unedited raw visual style dispelled widespread distrust of e-commerce (Chen and Yang 2023), and especially attracted urban consumers seeking original quality.



Figure 3. P8's livestreaming was selling tea. The red sign clearly states "Supporting rural revitalisation, all livestream profits belong to the village collective".

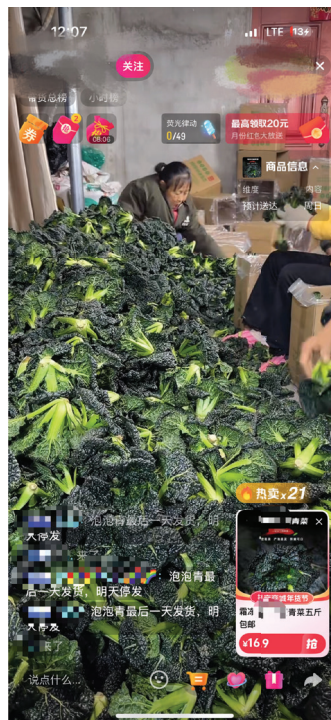


Figure 4. P11's live streaming room. The scene shows elderly women working. And P11 introduced products in the background audio: "green vegetables unsold due to frost".

Meanwhile, in terms of language, village officials commonly use highly affective narratives to portray rural realities during live streamings. For instance, they repeatedly describe the villages as “desolate” and “deadly quiet”, painting scenes of emptied communities of young migrant people, the hardships of left-behind elderly, and the hopeless plight of agricultural products rotting in the fields. For example, P11 said during a live stream:

These are quality greens unsold due to frost. The elderly growers rely on them for their livelihood, often walking long distances to markets with little success. Thanks for every support, and every order truly means the world to us.

These affective narratives of suffering can turn consumer behaviour toward affective engagement in rural revitalisation. When viewers make purchases, they are not merely buying products but responding to a sense of responsibility and compassion. This participation allows them to emotionally engage with the discourse of supporting rural development. Consumer behaviour is thus empowered with the noble political significance of supporting poverty alleviation and nourishing hometowns.

During live streaming, village officials simultaneously perform two roles: as sellers of agricultural products and as public servants representing the state at the grassroots level. This overlapping of roles makes the live streaming space a highly hybrid environment where product promotion, policy explanation, and emotional interaction often occur concurrently. Whether ordinary farmers or consumers, the deep trust in these officials is fundamentally tied to the credibility of their public office identity. One participant stated:

People in the chat often leave comments saying they believe in me because of my role. There are even those who jokingly warn that they will report me if the quality is poor. (P10, Village Party Secretary)

Here, platform visibility turns public authority into a commercial resource. Trust becomes traffic, and sales performance becomes evidence of service to the village. The mobilisation model, rooted in national credibility, tightly integrates political loyalty, vocational ethics, and market transactions, transforming public authority into actual merchandise sales. Viewer numbers, comments, likes, and sales figures function as platform metrics through which public service is made measurable as commercial performance. On a broader scale, village officials’ live streaming has monetised the nation’s image within the digital economy, boosting collective village income. For example, one participant shared:

When we first started live-streaming, our village’s collective economy was only 4,000 RMB, even less than my monthly salary. Now, we’ve managed to add another zero to that figure. (P5, CGVO)

Monetisation is therefore not external to affective governance. It becomes an important way for village officials to demonstrate service, competence, and commitment to local development. However, monetisation makes public authority commercially useful while also destabilising the boundary between public service and commercial profit. The practice of tying public office to market logic has triggered serious questions about professional ethics and institutional risks (Zhao et al. 2023). The study also found that as livestream viewership increases, village officials face growing accusations of “neglecting

their duties” and “seeking personal gain”. P8 mentioned in the interview that he once had to interrupt a live stream due to malicious reports. Facing this, he said, “There’s no choice but to make earnings as transparent as possible to accept oversight” (P8, Village Secretary). Meanwhile, P7 records videos after live streamings showing the money being delivered to farmers. Although most participants emphasised that their initial motivation for creating personal accounts was purely to promote their hometowns and boost collective income, the boundaries between power and personal gain have become dangerously blurred in actual practice. Among the 11 interviewees, three admitted to receiving a personal share of streaming profits (specific interviewees were not mentioned here for privacy reasons) and expressed vaguely regarding distribution plans for large sums. When public identity generates emotional trust and converts it into traffic, metrics, and sales, the boundary between public service and commercial profit becomes unstable. Platform visibility makes rural public authority commercially useful, but also more vulnerable to commercialisation and personal branding.

Discussion

Village officials occupy the lowest tier of state administration, yet on Douyin they become highly visible and interactive representatives of the state in everyday rural life. They act not only as governance agents, but also as content creators who use short videos and livestreams to make policies, governance achievements, and rural issues publicly visible. At the centre of this process is affective governance as a platform-mediated mechanism. Rather than simply extending the rural “rule of ritual” into digital space, village officials translate and rework its relational and moral resources through platform practices. In this sense, Douyin brings governance performance and the platform economy into the same mediated space, where rural public authority is made visible, emotionally recognisable, and commercially entangled.

However, it is necessary to critically reflect on the ethical and political risks of platformised affective governance. A question that cannot be avoided is whether this mediated governance renews grassroots authority or turns public service into a vehicle for personal visibility. The authority produced through affective governance is fragile because it depends on continuous performance, interaction, and audience recognition. Once controversies arise, the trust accumulated through affective mobilisation can collapse quickly (Papacharissi 2015). Increased visibility may also expose village officials to intensified public scrutiny, making their work more measurable, comparable, and subject to datafied observation by villagers, online audiences, platforms, and potentially superior authorities (Zhao et al. 2023). Even when platform metrics are not formally included in cadre evaluation, follower numbers, comments, livestream traffic, and sales performance may still be read informally as signs of competence, popularity, or responsiveness.

These tensions become sharper when affective governance is connected to rural e-commerce. Livestreaming may support agricultural sales and local development, but it also blurs the boundary between public duty, market activity, and personal gain. Village officials may slide into performative intimacy (Abidin 2015), the selling of rural poverty (Li 2020), and influencer-style self-branding. Affective communication can make policies and governance work more intelligible, but its reach remains uneven, especially among elderly villagers, while continuous content production may compete with less visible offline governance work. Existing criticisms that question whether village officials are fulfilling public duties or becoming “internet celebrities” reflect public

vigilance toward the commercialisation and performativity of online governance. Thus, this study does not romanticise platformised affective governance as a simple success story. It can enhance visibility and public connection, but it can also push grassroots authority toward personal branding, metric competition, commercialisation, and staged responsiveness.

Conclusion

This article has shown that Douyin reconfigures rural public authority in China through affective governance, understood as a platform-mediated mechanism. Village officials use short videos and livestreams to personalise authority, make policy work and governance performance visible, and frame commercial practices as public service. In this sense, platformisation alters not only how grassroots governance is communicated, but also how state authority is performed, viewed, and made acceptable in everyday rural life.

By focusing on village officials, the article extends research on digital political communication beyond elite actors and formal state messaging. It further shows how audience responses, platform interaction, and visible metrics become part of the process through which village officials produce public authority online. The result is a hybrid form of rural public authority in which formal administrative authority is combined with relational performance, influencer-style self-presentation, and platform visibility.

At the same time, this hybridisation generates tensions. As grassroots governance becomes more dependent on visibility, interaction metrics, and commercial mobilisation, it becomes vulnerable to suspicions of performativity, self-branding, personal gain, and the commercialisation of public service. Grassroots settings, therefore, offer a revealing site for understanding how digital platforms are remaking the public life of state power beyond liberal models of the public sphere.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee (approval no. 140-HS-CO-25-Zhang-Kerrigan) in University College Dublin on September 22, 2025. Respondents gave verbal consent for review before starting interviews.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

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DATA AVAILABILITY

The datasets generated and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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