


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Governing through Visibility: Local Government Experimentation with Internet Celebrity Cities in China

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Abstract

The rise of internet celebrity cities has become one of the most striking phenomena in China since 2021. How do local governments respond and harness this trend to advance their development goals? This study focuses on local experimentation in creating such cities, drawing on the case of the Village Football Super League (*Cun chao* 村超) in Guizhou. We identify policy entrepreneurship as a key driver of local experimentation and highlight three core strategies for creating internet celebrity cities: crafting local symbols, co-producing viral content and mitigating public opinion risk. Further analysis shows that this experimentation, by attracting massive public attention, simultaneously promotes economic growth, strengthens social cohesion, reinforces state narratives and projects China's national image onto the global stage. Overall, the findings suggest an emerging model in which public attention becomes a core resource for local development and governance in China's digital era.

摘要

自2021年以来，“网红城市”的兴起已成为中国最引人注目的社会现象之一。地方政府如何回应并借助这一趋势，以实现其发展目标？本文以贵州乡村足球超级联赛（“村超”）为案例，剖析地方政府围绕网红城市开展的政策试验。研究发现政策企业家精神是推动地方试验的关键动力，并揭示了地方政府如何通过三项核心策略，即塑造地方符号、共创传播内容和防控舆情风险，来成功打造网红城市。进一步分析显示，这类试验通过吸引海量公众注意力，在同一过程中带动经济增长、增进社会凝聚、强化国家叙事，并在全球传播中展现中国国家形象。总体而言，研究发现表明：在中国数字化转型背景下，一种以公众注意力为关键资源的地方发展与治理新模式正在形成。

Key words: local government; policy experimentation; popular communication; public attention; public governance

关键词: 公众传播; 地方政府; 政策实验; 公共治理; 公众注意力

In an age where attention has become a scarce resource, businesses and individuals are increasingly seeking to capture and monetize public attention. This phenomenon has taken on a distinctive form in China, where local governments are strategically leveraging the internet, particularly short video platforms, to create “internet celebrity cities” (*wanghong chengshi* 网红城市).¹ Ranging from initiatives such as Zibo city's 淄博市 barbecue to Tianshui's *malatang* 天水麻辣烫 (a local spicy hotpot dish) and Harbin's snow tourism, a growing number of Chinese cities have soared in popularity on

1 “Fupan 2024 nian shida wanghong chengshi: na yige ni hai meiyou quguo?” (Review of the top ten internet-famous cities in 2024. Which city have you not visited yet?). *Southern Metropolitan Daily*, 3 January 2025, <https://m.mp.oeeee.com/a/BAAFRD0000202501031041433.html>. Accessed 2 February 2024.

social media, attracting an influx of tourists and business investments. These cases exemplify an innovative approach to tourism development: local governments are now proactively generating online visibility through popular communication channels to boost tourism. This raises a series of questions: what drives local governments to embrace such innovations? What strategies do they adopt? And how does the central state respond to these local experiments?

Local governments' enthusiasm for developing tourism reflects both the continuity of political-economic incentives and the emergence of new structural drivers. On the one hand, the cadre promotion institutions continue to structure local bureaucrats' behaviour, as tourism remains a visible metric for demonstrating local performance.² On the other hand, several new factors have prompted local governments' turn towards tourism. First, the erosion of the land-finance model, mounting debt pressures and post-pandemic fiscal strain have made the search for sustainable sources of growth increasingly urgent.³ Second, the central government's strategic integration of culture and tourism has elevated the sector to a national priority, linking it to broader goals of consumption stimulation, cultural mobilization and soft power building. Third, the rise of the digital and attention economy has created new possibilities for localities to brand their cities and promote tourism. Together, these dynamics have made tourism a crucial area for local experimentation and policy innovation in contemporary China.

Beyond the question of why, the how – i.e. the specific strategies employed – demands closer scrutiny. Prior studies have investigated how local government officials innovatively utilize popular communication tools, such as livestreaming and parody videos, to capture internet attention.⁴ However, over time, local governments have developed more systematic and sophisticated strategies for engaging with internet-related trends. The popularity of internet celebrity cities is no longer driven solely by the actions of bureaucrats but increasingly entails the participation of official media, bloggers, businesses and ordinary people, all working together to produce viral content and enhance city visibility. This shift underscores a transformation in the role of local government, from a top-down promoter to a facilitator and coordinator of collective content creation. Despite this significant evolution, the specific strategies adopted by local governments and how they have developed these new capabilities remain underexplored.

While these initiatives are primarily driven by local governments, the role of the central state cannot be overlooked. In China, local governments innovate within institutional boundaries while actively seeking alignment with central agendas.⁵ Understanding the interplay between central and local actors offers a fuller picture of how policy innovation emerges in China. Furthermore, the significance of such experiments extends beyond their economic impact. Internet celebrity cities attract substantial audiences, which gives them a societal impact and makes them powerful tools for state communication.⁶ These multifaceted impacts demonstrate that such initiatives represent not only a new model for tourism development but also a broader form of governance innovation in contemporary China.

This study focuses on the processes and impacts of local experimentation in creating internet celebrity cities. It addresses three questions. First, how do local governments leverage popular communication to enhance city visibility and transform online attention into economic benefits? Second, how do they secure support from higher-level authorities to implement these initiatives? And finally, what are the economic, social and political consequences of such experimentation?

To gain an understanding of these issues, we centred our research on the Village Super League (*Cun chao* 村超), a village football event that originated in Rongjiang county 榕江县, Guizhou province. This case serves as a representative example of the “internet celebrity city” phenomenon.

2 Deng, Zhao and Ma 2022; Liu, Qin and Lin 2025.

3 Oi, Luo and Xu 2025.

4 Chen, Yifan, and Gong 2025; Sullivan, Zhao and Wang 2023.

5 Heilmann 2008; Zhu, Xufeng, and Zhao 2021.

6 Sullivan and Kehoe 2019.

Despite its limited tourism base, Rongjiang successfully reinvented itself as a nationally recognized destination through the strategic and creative use of popular communication. The initiative received high-profile endorsement from top national leaders, who elevated the Village Super League to a symbol of China's cultural vitality and rural revitalization.⁷ These features make the case especially valuable for examining how local governments innovate within structural constraints and how their initiatives resonate with central priorities. In addition to the in-depth case study of Rongjiang, the analysis incorporates insights from other internet celebrity cities to assess the broader application of such initiatives.

This study makes contributions to the existing literature in three main ways. First, it sheds light on a new model of development and governance emerging in the context of China's digital transformation. While previous research has primarily portrayed the local state as a direct provider of infrastructure and capital investment to spur economic growth,⁸ our findings reveal a shift towards an attention-driven approach, one that leverages online visibility as a new engine of development.

Second, this process also reflects the Chinese state's evolving understanding and capacity to harness popular communication.⁹ Rather than steering public discourse directly, we find that local governments have learned to mobilize multiple networks of actors and harness grassroots creativity to co-produce content that can generate broader impacts.

Third, this study contributes to our understanding of how central–local interactions shape local experimentation. We show that local governments use media strategies to legitimize their initiatives, while the central government appropriates locally popular symbols to advance national narratives and soft power. This reciprocal process demonstrates how local experimentation and central authority reinforce each other.

The Culture and Tourism Industry in China

In recent years, the Chinese party-state has undertaken a profound strategic re-evaluation of the culture and tourism industry, elevating it from just an economic sector to a multifaceted pillar of national governance. This paradigm shift was formally institutionalized in 2018 through a central government restructuring that merged the culture and tourism administrations. In 2022, the Chinese government officially launched its policy of “culture and tourism integration” (*wenlǚ ronghe* 文旅融合) as a directive to synergize the policies, resources and industrial chains across the two domains.¹⁰ The strategic intent is dualistic: to leverage tourism as a vehicle for the popular dissemination of culture, and to infuse tourism with cultural content to enhance its value and distinctiveness.

This re-evaluation has been further enriched in the post-pandemic era, crystallizing into a national strategy to build a “tourism powerhouse” (*lǚyou qiángguó* 旅游强国). As articulated at the 2024 National Tourism Development Conference, the industry's mandate has expanded beyond economic growth to encompass a broader set of objectives. The sector is now tasked with contributing to the “betterment of people's lives, boosting economic development, building spiritual homes, showcasing China's image and enhancing cultural exchanges.”¹¹ To translate this vision into reality, the centre

7 During his 2024 New Year's speech, Xi Jinping praised events like the Village Super League for being “Full of vitality, it embodies people's pursuit of happy lives, and showcases a vibrant, bustling China.” See “Guojia zhuxi Xi Jinping fabiao 2024 nian xinnian heci” (President Xi Jinping delivers 2024 New Year speech). *Xinhua*, 31 December 2023, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202312/content_6923673.htm. Accessed 10 December 2024.

8 Heberer 2016.

9 Sullivan, Zhao and Wang 2023.

10 The report to the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2022 explicitly proposed the strategic deployment of “promoting in-depth integration of culture and tourism.” See [chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnpbpcapjpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.whzgd.gov.cn/upload/20221020/6350f90c1b2e4.pdf](https://www.whzgd.gov.cn/upload/20221020/6350f90c1b2e4.pdf). Accessed 2 March 2026.

11 “Xi Jinping dui lǚyou gongzuo zuochu zhongyao zhishi: zhuoli wanshan xiandai lǚyouye tixi jiakuai jianshe lǚyou qiángguó tuidong lǚyouye gaozhiliang fazhan” (President Xi Jinping issued important instructions on tourism work: focus on

has issued a series of policies to support local governments, such as allowing them to finance tourism projects through special bonds.¹²

The drivers behind local governments' push for tourism development are often analysed through the dual lenses of fiscal and political motivation. Scholars argue that tourism serves as a vehicle for maximizing local revenue by diversifying the economic and tax base. This fiscal imperative has become even more pressing in the post-pandemic era.¹³ Moreover, the political pressures of the cadre evaluation system compel local officials to prioritize visible economic growth as a key strategy for their career advancement.¹⁴ This political imperative has been further amplified by the national policy mandating the integration of culture and tourism, encouraging local governments to capitalize on the economic, social and cultural value of tourism development.

The increasing prominence of tourism in China's development agenda has coincided with a broader transformation in the tourism industry and in the role of the local state. According to the local development state literature, local governments have acted as the main architects of regional growth, engineering state-led investment and industrial steering to achieve rapid economic growth.¹⁵ This model emphasized hardware-driven development through infrastructure construction, financial subsidies and direct industrial intervention. In the tourism sector, this translated into governments leading in constructing core amenities like roads and cableways, often operating scenic areas through state-owned entities, relying heavily on the "ticket economy" model.¹⁶ However, the industry is now undergoing a profound shift, as consumers increasingly seek immersive experiences, cultural depth and personalized services. Local governments are having to transform their roles and adapt their strategies to support tourism development.

Popular Communication as a Governance and Development Strategy

The 21st century has been witness to the rapid transformation of China's digital communication landscape, where the proliferation of social media and short video platforms has redefined the circulation of attention and dynamics of public engagement. In China, short videos have become the dominant form of entertainment and consumption, with 989 million monthly active users as of 2024.¹⁷ Driven by state regulations and business interests, short video platforms have gradually shifted from operating as entertainment spaces to becoming integrated platforms offering e-commerce, online education, propaganda and tourism, offering a hybrid "platform society."¹⁸

The Chinese government has increasingly leveraged short video platforms as a primary tool to engage with citizens and promote state ideology.¹⁹ By 2019, there were 17,380 governmental accounts on Douyin 抖音 (the original Chinese TikTok), including those of central and local

improving the modern tourism system, accelerate the building of a strong tourism country, and promote the high-quality, steady and sustainable development of the tourism industry). *Xinhuashe*, 17 May 2024, https://www.gov.cn/yaowen/liebiao/202405/content_6951885.htm. Accessed 30 September 2025.

12 For instance, the General Office of the State Council promulgated "Several measures to unleash tourism consumption potential and promote high-quality development of the tourism industry" (Guanyu shifang lüyou xiaofei qianli tuidong lüyou gaozhiliang fazhan de ruogan jianyi) and the Ministry of Culture and Tourism published its "Domestic tourism enhancement plan (2023–2025)" (Guonei lüyou tisheng jihu) in November 2023.

13 Deng, Zhao and Ma 2022; Oi, Luo and Xu 2025.

14 Li, Hongbin, and Zhou 2005.

15 Heberer 2016; Donaldson 2011.

16 Wang, Caipeng, and Xu 2014.

17 Chen, Yifan, and Gong 2025; Lu and Pan 2022; "Duan shipin yue huoyue yonghushu da 9.89 yi" (The number of monthly active users of short videos has reached 989 million). *People's Post and Telecommunications*, 2 August 2024, <http://www.news.cn/tech/20240802/254641b9f6e2462bb799481ae9ccd29e/c.html>. Accessed 10 March 2025.

18 Van Dijck, Poell and de Waal 2018; Zhang, Zongyi 2021.

19 Fung and Hu 2022.

government institutions and state media.²⁰ The government has reformed its communication strategies to capture public attention and persuade audiences. Findings show that government-produced videos have become increasingly entertaining, incorporating grassroots and pop culture elements to appeal to a wider audience.²¹ To capture maximum attention, the videos are designed to be bright, concise and high entropy.²² Moreover, an emerging trend of “participatory persuasion” has seen governments collaborating with citizens to co-produce content to promote national ideology.²³

In addition to their role as a publicity tool, short video platforms have evolved into key drivers of economic development. Under the government’s “Internet plus” initiative, these platforms have expanded their services to encompass the *wanghong* 网红 (internet celebrity) economy, which is closely integrated with live streaming and e-commerce.²⁴ In this attention economy, attention is commodified and monetized through sponsorships, product endorsements and sales. Influencers use short video platforms to connect products to consumers, drive sales and contribute to the economic transformation of both digital and traditional sectors.²⁵

The development of the *wanghong* economy has profoundly influenced not only business landscapes but also broader city image and tourism sectors.²⁶ Local governments are increasingly using video platforms to raise awareness of regional cultures, scenic spots and local businesses.²⁷ Not only have major cities adopted short videos to market urban development and boost tourism,²⁸ but remote regions have also utilized these platforms to showcase their unique cultural heritage and local products, thereby driving economic growth.²⁹ In addition, local officials have created humorous and parody-themed videos to promote local culture and tourism development.³⁰

To further capitalize on the *wanghong* economy, the government’s approach has evolved beyond mere publicity; it is increasingly tapping into the commercial potential of viral trends, influencer marketing and attention monetization.³¹ Some local governments have embraced the logic of cultivating internet celebrity cities, representing a new fusion of digital media and tourism. However, the transition to this new model and the implications of such experiments remain underexplored.

The Rise of Internet Celebrity Cities

The term “internet celebrity city” refers to cities or localities that achieve widespread online popularity through viral digital content – often on short video platforms – and subsequently experience surges in tourism growth. Even prior to the pandemic, some major tourist cities, such as Xi’an and Chongqing, were using online promotion to attract attention. Over time, this approach has been taken up by many lesser-known localities seeking to enhance their profiles and draw visitors through digital visibility.³²

20 “Shipin shidai zhengwu xinmeiti zoujin nianqing yidai” (In the era of video: government new media engages the younger generation). *Renmin ribao*, 26 August 2020, https://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-08/26/c_1126412910.htm. Accessed 10 March 2025.

21 Chen, Xu, Valdovinos Kaye and Zeng 2021; Chen, Yifan, and Gong 2025; Li, Yukun, Liu and Shao 2024; Zhao, Luming, and Ye 2025.

22 Lu and Pan 2022.

23 Cui and Tong 2023; Repnikova and Fang 2018; Xu 2024.

24 Guo 2023; Han, Jiashu 2024.

25 Han, Xiaofei 2021; Goldhaber 1997; Simon 1996; Cunningham and Craig 2019; Hong 2017.

26 Pan 2021.

27 Zou 2022.

28 Zhou and Wang 2014.

29 Zhang, Qinjin 2024; Zhao, Lizhen 2023.

30 Chen, Yifan, and Gong 2025; Jiang et al. 2022.

31 Gao 2023; Pan 2021.

32 Jiang et al. 2022.

Initially, it was the directors of culture and tourism bureaus who experimented with playing the role of “internet celebrities” to attract attention.³³ An early pioneer was the director of the culture and tourism bureau in Garzê 甘孜州, a Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, whose videos went viral.³⁴ Capitalizing on this unexpected success, he used the platform to showcase his martial arts outlook, attracting a huge audience. Inspired by his success, other local officials created similar eye-catching videos to promote regional culture and tourism. These videos collectively garnered over 426 million views, received more than 6.6 million likes and nearly a million comments, and were shared over 1.19 million times.³⁵ This surge in attention has contributed to the development of tourism in these areas.³⁶ However, parody videos have also elicited controversy and criticism, with some critics arguing that local governments have done little beyond creating entertaining content and have failed to address the deeper needs of the tourism industry.

The second wave of internet-driven tourism promotion began in 2023, following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁷ Zibo city in Shandong province pioneered a new mode of experimentation with a campaign that originated from user-generated content – specifically, college students’ barbecue-themed gratitude videos recorded during post-pandemic reunions. As these grassroots narratives gained attention, the Zibo government swiftly transitioned from passive observer to active co-creator.³⁸ Capitalizing on public curiosity about “barbecue diplomacy,” the local government systematically released behind-the-scenes governance stories, such as officials personally serving at train stations. These curated narratives, amplified through official media such as Xinhua News, spurred numerous internet influencers and tourists to visit Zibo and “check in” (*da ka* 打卡).³⁹ The results were transformative: in 2023, approximately six million short videos about Zibo garnered 28.4 billion views.⁴⁰ The city welcomed 61.1 million domestic tourists, generating 62 billion yuan in tourism revenue, marking increases of 67.6 per cent and 68.4 per cent, respectively, compared with 2022.⁴¹

33 Chen, Yifan, and Gong 2025.

34 In 2019, the director planned to harness the internet fame of Ding Zhen, a local resident whose videos went viral on the internet, to attract tourists to his hometown, Garzê. However, the director’s own good looks attracted the attention of netizens, who encouraged the director himself to be the front man.

35 “‘Chuquan’ hou zenme ‘chulai,’ ‘wanghong’ juzhangmen youhuashuo” (After gaining viral fame, how can they continue to shine? Internet-famous directors share their insights). *Pengpai*, 19 March 2023, https://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_22364852. Accessed 3 March 2025.

36 According to official reports, in 2021, the number of tourists in the whole year was 35.78 million, and the tourism revenue was 39.24 billion yuan, an increase of 15.3% and 15%, respectively. See “Ganzi zangzu zizhizhou tongjiju” (Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Statistics Bureau), 21 October 2022, <https://www.neac.gov.cn/seac/c103544/202210/1159328.shtml#:~:text=%E5%85%A8%E5%B9%B4%E6%8E%A5%E5%BE%85%E6%B8%B8%E5%AE%A23577.95,%E7%BE%8E%E5%85%83%EF%BC%8C%E5%9D%87%E5%A2%9E%E9%95%BF53.7%25%E3%80%82>. Accessed 22 February 2025.

37 Tourism saw a dramatic recovery after the pandemic: in 2023, the number of domestic trips reached 4.891 billion, an increase of 93.3% from 2022, and spending increased by 140.3%, totalling 4.91 trillion yuan.

38 The government set up 21 specialized service teams within 48 hours, implementing standardized pricing and offering free shuttle buses for barbecue tourists. This rapid institutional response transformed spontaneous online attention into tangible service upgrades.

39 “Zibo shaokao huobao beihou de ‘liuliang mima’” (The “traffic code” behind the popularity of Zibo barbecue). *Renmin wang*, 12 April 2023, <http://finance.people.com.cn/n1/2023/0412/c1004-32662288.html>. Accessed 10 February 2025; “Zibo shaokao de jishiwan youke dou cong near lai? 63% laizi besheng, Hebei zhan 8%” (Where do the hundreds of thousands of tourists who come to Zibo BBQ come from? 63% are from Shandong province, and 8% are from Hebei). *Renmin ribao*, 2 May 2023, https://news.cnr.cn/native/gd/20230502/t20230502_526238154.shtml. Accessed 10 February 2025.

40 “‘Wu yi’ Zibo zai douyin you huole! 38 wan ren zai douyin daka Zibo, cong meishi dao wenlü, douyin Zibo xiangguan shipin nian bofang liang dao 284 yi” (May Day in Zibo hot again on Douyin! 380,000 people “checked in” on Douyin in Zibo, from food to cultural tourism, Douyin videos about Zibo had 28.4 billion views). *Sohu.com*, 10 May 2024, https://www.sohu.com/a/777916192_121117075. Accessed 26 February 2026.

41 “2023 nian Zibo shi guomin jingji he shehui fazhan tongji gongbao” (Zibo city’s 2023 national economic and social development statistical bulletin), https://tj.zibo.gov.cn/gongkai/channel_c_5f9fa491ab327f36e4c13077_n_1605682680.3204/doc_66067c018940ec8b8715343_665303a8578b276146cfbeed997a0fe4.pdf. Accessed 1 April 2025.

Harbin's 2023 viral success exemplifies a government-led strategy that converted crisis management into a city branding opportunity. The campaign's ignition point – a tourist complaint about a bad experience – was transformed into immediate policy adjustments. This operational agility, showcased through short videos, redefined bureaucratic responsiveness as shareable digital content.⁴² Momentum grew as local residents enthusiastically joined the movement, offering spontaneous hospitality to tourists. Personal social media accounts, along with official media outlets, publicized these interactions with emotionally resonant short videos, attracting nationwide attention and driving a tourism boom.⁴³ During the three-day New Year's holiday, Harbin received over three million tourists, generating tourism revenue of 5.914 billion yuan.

Seeing the transformative potential of these digital strategies, many local governments across China have proactively capitalized on internet-related possibilities. Between 8 and 14 January 2024, immediately following Harbin's viral surge, more than 1,300 short videos were posted on Douyin by 26 provincial culture and tourism departments, attracting 58 million new followers.⁴⁴

Methods and Data

This study focuses on the case of Rongjiang to illuminate how the local government created the Village Super League and explore the impact of this experiment. Unlike cities such as Zibo and Harbin, where local governments capitalized on user-generated viral content, Rongjiang's government actively orchestrated a trending topic following several unsuccessful government-led attempts which paved the way for an eventual breakthrough. Furthermore, this case stands out because it was endorsed by the highest levels of leadership, positioning the Village Super League as a symbol of rural vitality in China. How a locally crafted symbol became a part of the national narrative warrants further exploration.

Rongjiang county is located in south-east Guizhou and falls under the jurisdiction of Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture 黔东南苗族侗族自治州. It comprises 20 townships and 250 administrative villages. The county is home to 16 ethnic minority groups, primarily the Miao 苗族, Dong 侗族, Shui 水族 and Yao 瑶族, who account for 83.9 per cent of the total population. Rongjiang was designated as a national poverty-stricken county, with a per capita GDP in 2022 of only 37 per cent of the national average. The economy relies primarily on timber processing, with an annual output of less than 100 million yuan.⁴⁵ As more than 98 per cent of the land is mountainous, agriculture remains undeveloped, although it still accounts for approximately 26 per cent of the economy. Additionally, the region has undergone a significant outflow of labour. Although the registered population is 385,000, only 293,500 residents remained by the end of 2022, with a total labour force recorded at 197,700.⁴⁶ With its inconvenient transportation, underdeveloped infrastructure and no distinctive natural attractions, Rongjiang was an unlikely contender for a major tourist destination.

42 “Tanxun douyin de mima: Harbin qiji keyi fuzhi ma?” (Uncovering the Douyin code: can the “Harbin miracle” be replicated?). *Geekpark*, 12 February 2024, <https://www.geekpark.net/news/331352>. Accessed 10 March 2025.

43 “Huole de Harbin, heyi yizhi huo xiaqu?” (Why is Harbin, which has become popular, still so popular?). *Xinhua wang*, 6 January 2024, <https://app.xinhuanet.com/news/article.html?articleId=4242b71ace201d25536213f5abfe93d7>. Accessed 10 February 2025; “Harbin lüyou weihe neng huo chuquan?” (Why is Harbin tourism so popular?). *Beijing qingnian bao*, 5 January 2024, <http://www.news.cn/politics/20240105/22b7760daf89486d9820e25b37bcd099/c.html>. Accessed 10 February 2025. According to the news report, during the three-day New Year's Day holiday alone, more than 3 million tourists visited, with a total tourism revenue of 5.914 billion yuan.

44 “Gedi wenlù Douyin chuzhao, ‘tingquan’ chucheng chengshi ‘chuquan’” (Local cultural tourism bureaus are using Douyin strategies, “listening to advice” and helping cities “go viral”). *Banyuetan*, 19 January 2024, <https://finance.sina.cn/2024-01-19/detail-inaczvhe8558617.d.html>. Accessed 23 February 2025.

45 Data derived from an internal government report concerning Rongjiang county.

46 *Ibid.*

This study draws on extensive fieldwork conducted in Rongjiang in October 2023, immediately after it gained national fame, and in July 2024, during the second iteration of the Village Super League. These visits provided first-hand insights into the evolution of the local government's strategies, media operations and economic and social impacts. During fieldwork, we carried out interviews with key stakeholders responsible for organizing and implementing the Village Super League, including the chief and deputy executives and officials from seven relevant Party organs and government departments: the organization committee (*zuzhibu* 组织部), publicity department (*xuanchuanbu* 宣传部), bureau of ethnic and religious affairs (*minzu zongjiao shiwujū* 民族宗教事务局), bureau of culture and tourism (*wenhua yu luyouju* 文化与旅游局), bureau of rural revitalization (*xiangcun zhenxingju* 乡村振兴局), bureau of agriculture and rural affairs (*nongye nongcunju* 农业农村局), and the Village Super League office (*cunchao bangongshi* 村超办公室). A particular focus was placed on the New Media Working Group (*xinmeiti zhuanban* 新媒体专班).⁴⁷

We also connected with township and village cadres to gain insights into both the implementation process and their engagement with the residents. We visited four villages and interviewed approximately 70 local residents, including football players, business owners and villagers, to assess their perceptions of and participation in the event.⁴⁸ In addition, we conducted interviews with members of the local football association, the Dong Ethnicity Association, the Rongjiang Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection Centre and local businesses, including the Village Super League Cultural and Tourism Development Corporation.⁴⁹ Finally, we systematically collected and analysed government policies, newspaper reports, academic studies and publications authored by event organizers to ensure a multilayered examination of this case.⁵⁰

Policy Entrepreneurship as the Driving Force

How did an impoverished county like Rongjiang embark on such a unique pathway to development? As has been observed in many cases across China, the driving force behind policy innovation is often local policy entrepreneurs.⁵¹ In Rongjiang, this role was played by the county chief executive.⁵² Transferred from Shenzhen to Rongjiang in 2021, he brought with him a broader vision of development and initiated a strategy of experimenting with new media for economic growth. As a policy entrepreneur, he demonstrated social acuity, identified key problems and built effective teams to launch policy innovations.⁵³

As a formerly nationally designated poor county, Rongjiang received substantial central transfers during the “Targeted poverty alleviation” campaign (2017–2020). When that initiative was brought

47 We conducted several semi-structured interviews with county leaders, totalling about 6 hours in duration. We held 2 group discussions with 7 bureau-level officials for around 6 hours. In addition, we conducted semi-interviews with the leader and employees of the New Media Working Group. Our questions addressed why the Village Super League had gained internet popularity and how the Rongjiang government and its departments had contributed to its rise. Interviewees were also asked to describe the impact of the Village Super League and provide relevant statistics.

48 At the township and village levels, we conducted fieldwork in 4 villages in 4 towns. We organized a focus group with 3 township officials (approximately 1.5 hours) and conducted individual interviews with village cadres in each village (1.5–2 hours each) to explore their roles in organizing and supporting the Village Super League. We also conducted informal interviews and conversations with villagers, asking whether and how they had participated in the Village Super League and how they perceived the event.

49 We held 2 focus group discussions with 10 participants representing local enterprises and social organizations. These discussions explored how businesses and nongovernmental actors had become involved in the Village Super League and how the event had affected them.

50 Ouyang and Wang 2024.

51 He 2018; Shi and Frenkiel 2021; Teets 2015; Zhu, Yapeng 2013.

52 The chief executive was promoted to county Party secretary in Rongjiang in 2024. In this study, we refer to him by the title he held at the time of our research, chief executive.

53 Mintrom and Norman 2009.

to a close, the local government faced mounting pressure to create economic growth. In response, its leadership sought innovative strategies. In line with Xi Jinping's call for Guizhou to lead in digital transformation, the county chief framed the digital economy as a "window of change" and promoted new media investment as a cost-effective development tool for underdeveloped regions.⁵⁴ In November 2021, he proposed a slogan that encouraged local residents to master digital tools to generate income.⁵⁵ Additionally, informed by his experience in more developed regions, he identified the absence of strong place branding as a key constraint on Rongjiang's development. He believed that effective branding could enhance product value, stimulate demand and promote economic growth. This insight led him to look towards new media as a crucial tool for building Rongjiang's brand. However, at the time, a specific branding strategy for the county had yet to take shape.

To support this plan, the chief executive launched talent attraction programmes to bring in individuals with diverse expertise to contribute to the strategy.⁵⁶ In 2021, he recruited an employee with extensive experience in using new media to promote tourism destinations. According to the employee, he accepted the invitation because he agreed with the chief executive's vision of "turning new media into a productive force."⁵⁷ Under his guidance, Rongjiang established its own New Media Centre affiliated with the Media Convergence Centre (*rongmeiti zhongxin* 融媒体中心). The centre's primary focus was to utilize digital platforms to promote local culture and tourism. He then went on to set up the New Media Working Group, which played a crucial role in promoting the Village Super League.

Companies specializing in streaming and e-commerce were also invited to participate. In 2022, Rongjiang county established a new media and e-commerce industrial park to serve multiple functions, including talent training, live-streaming centres and e-commerce public services.⁵⁸ By August 2024, the chief executive's talent attraction programme had drawn more than 50 companies to the park.⁵⁹ These companies then built streaming accounts and platforms to market agricultural products and promote tourism.

The local government has also empowered a broader population to stimulate rural entrepreneurship through social media and e-commerce. It has integrated various training resources and partnered with three companies to provide vocational training to residents. In 2022, the local government launched the "Ten thousand people action" initiative, which resulted in over 35,000 individuals – ranging from heritage inheritors to farmers – receiving basic training in using social media. According to a local government report, the initiative has resulted in 2,200 newly established live-streaming teams and 12,800 personal media accounts in Rongjiang.⁶⁰ These trained residents were later mobilized by the local government to promote the Village Super League on social media.

54 Data from interviews with the chief executive, Rongjiang, 24 July 2024, and an internal government report.

55 The slogan was: "turning smartphones into new agricultural tools, data into new farming resources and livestreaming into new farming activities" (*rang shouji biancheng xin nongju, rang shuju biancheng xin nongzi, rang zhibo biancheng xin nonghuo*).

56 The talent attraction programmes included 3 components: first, the establishment of the Rongjiang County Alumni Association, which attracted over 18,000 outstanding local residents and alumni; second, the recruitment of specialized talent, including scholars, experts, celebrities and private entrepreneurs; and third, the invitation of cultural figures to serve as promoters for publicity and marketing.

57 Interview with the leader of the New Media Centre, 25 July 2024.

58 "Guanyu yinfa Rongjiang xinmeiti daren xiangcun zhenxing xin nongren peiyu xiangmu shishi fang'an de tongzhi" (Notice on the issuance of the implementation plan for the Rongjiang New Media Influencer Rural Revitalization New Farmers Cultivation Project); "Rongjiang xian 2023 nian nongcun 'xin san bian' xinmeiti zhuli xiangcun zhenxing gongzuo shishi fang'an" (Rongjiang county 2023 rural "new three changes" new media support for rural revitalization implementation plan).

59 According to several internal government reports on the Village Super League.

60 Ibid.

Policy Experimentation with Internet Celebrity Cities

Crafting local symbols

In the digital media environment, symbols are crucial mediating vehicles through which culture is recognized, circulated and emotionally resonant. The first strategy of the Rongjiang government, therefore, was to identify and craft locally grounded symbols that could both mobilize community enthusiasm and resonate with wider audiences online.

Initially, the Rongjiang government relied on traditional approaches, organizing sports and cultural events, such as marathons, bullfights and ethnic festivals, to attract tourists. However, these government-led efforts lacked sustainability and had limited impact.⁶¹ Through these experiences, the local government learned two key lessons.⁶² First, combining sports with cultural content could create distinctive and emotionally engaging symbols capable of attracting online attention. Second, tourism development could not rely solely on government initiatives but required the active participation of residents, businesses and online communities to make profound impacts.

The chief executive also drew crucial lessons from other cases, particularly Zibo's barbecue phenomenon and the Village Basketball Association (*Cun BA* 村BA).⁶³ Zibo's tourism boom illustrated how content creation and dissemination on short video platforms could serve as powerful drivers of tourism growth, while the viral popularity of *Cun BA* revealed the potential of cultural symbols deeply rooted in local identity to generate widespread emotional resonance.⁶⁴ Inspired by these examples, the Rongjiang government decided to embrace the logic of popular communication and strategically craft a digital identity that blended sports, ethnic minority culture and local tourism, creating new symbols that could capture online attention, foster civic pride and transform the county into a recognizable symbol.

Village football first came to the county government's attention through an accidental encounter on short video platforms in January 2023. Football has been a popular sport in Rongjiang for decades, with villagers organizing informal village-level competitions during the Spring Festival. The leader of the New Media Centre happened upon a short video posted by a local resident that captured the football champions receiving pigs and cows as prizes – a vivid, humorous and highly localized scene. Recognizing its viral potential, he quickly mobilized his media team to collect more footage and conduct experimental posts to test its online appeal. When these posts generated strong engagement, county leaders realized that village football could serve as a powerful symbolic vehicle linking grassroots culture with digital communication.

Building on these insights, the county government decided to elevate the spontaneous village games into a county-wide sports event by infusing them with cultural elements that reflected Rongjiang's ethnic and festive identity. With official support, the 2023 Village Super League kicked off on 13 May and featured weekly matches over a two-month period. In total, 20 villages entered football teams composed of local villagers. The villages also organized cheerleaders dressed in traditional ethnic dress, playing local instruments and singing folk songs to support their teams.⁶⁵ This unique blend of village football and cultural performances was captured on video and quickly spread throughout China.

61 According to our field interviews conducted on 7 October 2023, while these efforts attracted some online attention, they also revealed clear limitations. First, some of the events lacked distinctiveness, such as basketball tournaments or marathons, and failed to sustain public engagement. Second, certain ethnic or folk events, which attracted local residents, were too localized or episodic to appeal to broader audiences. For instance, the Guzang Festival occurs only once every 13 years, and the bullfighting event was perceived as too violent to gain wide acceptance.

62 Ouyang and Wang 2024.

63 *Cun BA* is a grassroots basketball league in rural China that gained internet popularity through viral short videos. It originated in Taijiang county in Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture. The league's appeal lies in its unique combination of local culture, passionate community participation and thrilling basketball matches.

64 Interview with a county leader, 7 October 2023.

65 Interviews with township and village officials, 20–24 July 2024.

Co-producing viral content

Another key element in the making of an internet celebrity city lies in the co-production of viral content. Prior studies have highlighted that collaboration between government and citizens in political communication has become a new strategy for generating influence.⁶⁶ In Rongjiang, the broad participation of various social actors in creating narratives, stories and symbols was pivotal to the success of the Village Super League.

Initially, Rongjiang introduced an approach known as “government-guided, society-disseminated” (*guan tui min ban* 官推民办),⁶⁷ reflecting an institutional adaptation to the participatory logic of digital media. The New Media Centre invited three key groups to promote the Village Super League: local e-commerce companies, internet influencers and ordinary residents. To bridge the differences in digital literacy, the government provided curated video banks, narrative templates and AI-assisted editing tools to facilitate short-video production.⁶⁸ To further incentivize participation, the local government launched short-video challenges and rewarded those who achieved high engagement online. This strategy rapidly mobilized a wide range of participants and led to the creation of thousands of videos within a single day.⁶⁹

Meanwhile, local authorities strategically curated content to ensure ideological alignment with official discourse. The Village Super League was positioned to convey “positive energy,”⁷⁰ consistent with the value system promoted by the state.⁷¹ Beyond football, emphasis was placed on themes such as cultural diversity, political harmony and social positivity.⁷² The New Media Working Group proposed 50–60 relevant topics for each week’s football matches. These topics and accompanying footage were distributed through WeChat groups to content creators, enabling them to reinterpret narratives from diverse perspectives.⁷³ This approach served to balance state-led guidance with decentralized creativity, enhancing content diversity and broadening audience engagement across social media platforms. By doing so, it effectively captured netizens’ attention and triggered the first wave of viral dissemination.

The viral dissemination of the Village Super League then attracted a wide range of social actors, including bloggers, celebrities, social organizations and multi-channel network (MCN) agencies, who actively joined the content-creation process.⁷⁴ They engaged in short-video editing, event livestreams and exclusive interviews, systematically exploring and amplifying the stories behind the Village Super League. Each group leveraged its own strengths and audience orientation to foreground different aspects of the Village Super League and collectively contribute to the exponential expansion of the Village Super League’s digital presence.⁷⁵

Ordinary netizens also played a vital role by commenting, sharing and resharing videos, which kept the discussions active and the topic continuously popular. Many interpreted the Village Super

66 Xu 2024.

67 Interview with a county official, 7 October 2023.

68 Ouyang and Wang 2024.

69 Ibid.

70 Chen, Xu, Valdovinos Kaye and Zeng 2021.

71 Interview with a county official, 7 October 2023.

72 Zhao, Jiaye, and Zhang 2024.

73 Ibid.

74 The algorithmic content distribution system used by Douyin also contributes to the popularity of these short videos. This system first exposes these new videos to a small audience. Engagement metrics such as likes, comments and watch time determine if the video is pushed to a larger pool. When the views reach a certain threshold, human intervention is used to decide whether to push the videos to a larger audience, creating viral growth. This algorithm encourages bloggers to tag their videos with #CunChao, leveraging topic-based interest pools to maximize visibility and reach.

75 For instance, one popular short video featured B Tai, an influencer with over 20 million followers who is widely recognized for his anti-fraud campaigns. His video testing the honesty of Rongjiang’s local businesses attracted more than 2.4 million likes. Other examples include Han Qiaosheng and Huang Jianxiang, both well-known football commentators in China, whose videos about the Village Super League attracted considerable attention from football fans.

League as a grassroots critique of China's professional football establishment, particularly in light of the national team's disappointing performance.⁷⁶ Existing studies reveal that the Chinese public has expressed complex emotions about football, characterized by deep frustration with the national team's performance alongside a persistent emotional engagement.⁷⁷ The Village Super League offered a symbolic arena where collective emotions towards Chinese football, both frustration and aspiration, could be positively re-channelled.

The collective co-construction of narratives and meanings by digital publics allowed the event to reach and resonate with diverse audiences nationwide. As a result, what began as a county-level event quickly evolved into a nationwide phenomenon. By 2023, the Village Super League hashtag had accumulated over 48 billion views across the internet, with Douyin videos alone reaching 13 billion plays, setting historical records.⁷⁸

Managing public opinion risks

Online stability remains a central concern for local governments.⁷⁹ In experiments with mass-oriented communication, where the broad participation of citizens and bloggers is encouraged, effective discourse guidance is imperative.

The New Media Centre established the New Media Industry Association (*xin meiti hangye xiehui* 新媒体行业协会) to connect with 12,000 internet influencers both within and outside Rongjiang county. In 2022, the local united front work department set up the Networking Association of Internet Professionals (*wangluojie renshi lianyihui* 网络界人士联谊会), primarily by co-opting prestigious enterprises and individuals with significant online influence. The core objective of these associations is to integrate digital influencers into the local governance framework and to regulate online discourse and activities to reinforce stability.

In addition, the local government required 25 townships and 250 villages to create new media stations and offices, under the leadership of the county government. These offices are responsible for monitoring online videos within their jurisdictions. Each township station manages a WeChat group that includes local media creators. When officials pick up on what could be considered sensitive content online, they can use their local networks to quickly track down and contact the relevant creators, taking necessary measures to protect Rongjiang's image.

Moreover, local governments are increasingly using emotional governance to prevent public opinion risks.⁸⁰ Rather than silencing negative feedback outright, they often respond with empathy and hospitality, aiming to transform discontent into emotional resonance. For example, when online complaints arise, officials issue apologies for any inconvenience or unpleasant experiences, often followed by warm invitations to visit Rongjiang as a gesture of goodwill.⁸¹ This affective strategy seeks to cultivate feelings of warmth and connection, reframing criticism as an opportunity for engagement. In addition, the local government signals responsiveness and a service-oriented ethos, whether through timely assistance for tourists or prompt replies to online concerns. This approach

76 "Guizhou Village Super League: duofang dianzan de xiangcun zuqiu liansai yinfa le naxie taolun" (Guizhou "Village Super League": what debates has this widely praised rural football tournament sparked?). *BBC News*, 21 June 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/zhongwen/trad/chinese-news-65973562>. Accessed 9 September 2025.

77 Gündoğan and Sonntag 2018; Sullivan, Chadwick and Gow 2019.

78 "'Cun chao,' gonggu tuozhan tuopin chengguo de chenggong shijian – fang guowuyuan yuan canshi, yuan guowuyuan fupin kaifa lingdao xiaozu zhuanjia zixun weiyuanhui fuzhuren Tang Min" ("Village Super League": a successful practice in consolidating and expanding poverty alleviation achievements – an interview with Tang Min, former member of the State Council and former deputy director of the Expert Advisory Committee of the State Council Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development). *People's Weekly*, 20 May 2024, https://paper.people.com.cn/rmzk/html/2024-05/20/content_26059086.htm. Accessed 2 March 2026.

79 King, Pan and Roberts 2017; Kuang 2018.

80 Cui and Tong 2023; Mattingly and Yao 2022.

81 Interview with several county officials, 7 October 2023.

is not unique to Rongjiang; similar practices have emerged in cities like Zibo and Harbin, where local authorities actively engage in online discourse and embrace public suggestions to both diffuse dissatisfaction and reinforce a positive city image.

From Local Innovation to Political Legitimacy

How did this policy experimentation obtain the endorsement of higher levels of government? We reveal that Rongjiang's government, after gaining online visibility and grassroots popularity, collaborated with official media to align the event with mainstream narratives and gain central support.

As highlighted in prior studies, local innovation in China often encounters constraints, including bureaucratic inertia and a risk-averse mentality among officials.⁸² The Village Super League was initially strongly opposed by the prefectural government, which had concerns about public health risks following the pandemic and the potential for crowd-related accidents.⁸³ Additionally, many local officials were reluctant to support innovative programmes because of the heavy scrutiny of the government during the debt crisis.⁸⁴ According to the county chief executive, many officials were trapped in a “do no harm” mentality, which focused on avoiding mistakes rather than embracing new initiatives.⁸⁵

To overcome this bureaucratic inertia and risk aversion, local policy entrepreneurs turned to official media as intermediaries to translate online popularity into political recognition. They realized that gaining higher-level support depended on demonstrating how local values could resonate with the state's mainstream ideology, something that fragmented and entertainment-oriented online content alone could not achieve. Therefore, they proactively reached out to municipal and provincial media outlets to help reframe and promote the Village Super League, which eventually drew the event to the attention of national media such as *People's Daily*, CCTV and Xinhua News Agency.⁸⁶ These official media raised the status of the Village Super League from a local folk event to a national emblem of rural revitalization and cultural confidence. Ultimately, Xinhua News Agency portrayed the experiment as a vivid embodiment of “Chinese-style modernization,” integrating it into the broader ideological framework of national development.⁸⁷

The involvement of the official media also helped to secure high-level political recognition. The media coverage of the Village Super League captured the attention of key political figures, including the minister of the provincial publicity department, who praised its success and recommended it as a model for other cities in Guizhou.⁸⁸ Moreover, the provincial Party secretary, drawing on his experience with the publicity department of the National Radio and Television Administration, recognized the Village Super League as a potential new symbol of Guizhou, helping to alleviate political and public concerns over the province's debt crisis.⁸⁹ He also saw the initiative as an opportunity to enhance China's global image.

82 Chen, Xuelian 2017; Chen, Wei, Keng and Zhang 2023; Teets and Hasmath 2020.

83 Interviews with several county officials, 8 October 2023, 25 July 2024.

84 “Guizhou fazhai 2149 yi huanshi defangzhai fengxian, jianli jianquan huazhai fengxian tizhi jizhi” (Guizhou issued 214.9 billion yuan in bonds to ease local debt risks and establish a sound debt risk reduction system and mechanism). *Yicai.com*, 24 November 2023, <https://www.yicai.com/news/101911518.html>. Accessed 20 February 2025.

85 Chen, Keng and Zhang 2023; Wang, Peng, and Yan 2020.

86 According to the (internal) “Report on the work of Guizhou Village Super League (2025),” events to do with the Village Super League have featured in over 1,500 articles and reports by major national mainstream media outlets, including *People's Daily*, Xinhua News Agency, CCTV News and *People.cn*.

87 “Cong Cun BA Village Super League kan xibu qianfada diqu Zhongguo shi xiandaihua de shengdong shijian” (A look at the vivid practice of Chinese-style modernization in the underdeveloped areas of the west from the perspective of the Cun BA and Village Super League). *Guizhou ribao*, 20 September 2023, <https://www.gz.news.cn/20230920/73c23a4933e047e186503625f69de9a8/c.html>. Accessed 3 March 2025.

88 Interview with a county official, 7 October 2023.

89 Interview with a county leader, 7 October 2023.

With their support, the Village Super League has expanded beyond China's borders, serving as a vehicle for enhancing the country's international image. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has embraced the Village Super League as a tool for international publicity.⁹⁰ In 2023, former Brazilian international footballer Ricardo Kaka visited Rongjiang, and the English Premier League (EPL) signed a strategic cooperation agreement at the China International Fair for Trade in Services.⁹¹ In December of that year, the EPL launched the "Premier skills" project in Rongjiang, aimed at training local football coaches.⁹² In 2024, with the support of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the Village Super League organized international friendly matches with teams from Belt and Road countries. These efforts aimed to position Rongjiang as a cultural platform for diplomatic and grassroots exchange. By December 2024, more than 1,000 football players from more than 50 countries had participated in friendly matches in Rongjiang. Looking ahead, the Village Super League plans to host its own community football World Cup by 2028.⁹³

The Economic, Social and Political Impacts

Economic development

The Village Super League has evolved into a major driver of tourism development and local fiscal revenue growth in Rongjiang. Local government strategies for transforming attention into economic resources have focused on four key aspects: upgrading the tourism industry, revitalizing the traditional economy, attracting business investments and commercializing regional brands.

First, the local government has taken proactive steps towards improving transport accessibility, developing tourism services, upgrading accommodation offerings and creating a variety of consumer experiences. The output is remarkable, as demonstrated in [Table 1](#). In 2024, the county attracted 9.5 million visitors and achieved a tourism revenue of 10.8 billion yuan, nearly triple the pre-pandemic levels of 3.3 million visitors and 2.4 billion yuan in 2019 (see [Table 1](#)).⁹⁴

The fastest-growing sectors have been the service industries, particularly hospitality. In 2023, the county's food and beverage industry generated 1.2 billion yuan in revenue, and this figure rose to 1.341 billion yuan in 2024. In addition, 113 new hotels were created, increasing the number of beds from 5,958 to 10,845 over two years. The accommodation occupancy rate increased from 83.2 per cent in 2023 to 89.6 per cent in 2024, with operating revenues reaching 169 million yuan by 2024.⁹⁵

Second, the local government has actively supported the development of streaming and e-commerce to sell local agricultural products. E-commerce companies in Rongjiang have exploited the popularity of the Village Super League to expand their market presence. Additionally, social

90 "‘Zhe shi weida de bisai!’ Hua Chunying, Zhongguo zhuwai shiguan fenfen dianzan Guizhou ‘Village Super League’" ("This is a great game!" Hua Chunying and Chinese embassies abroad praise Guizhou's "Village Super League"). *Guizhou ribao*, 6 June 2023, <https://m.huanqiu.com/article/4DCAiLmJX60>. Accessed 20 February 2025.

91 "‘Cunchao’ signs MOU with EPL to promote local development through sports." *Global Times*, 4 September 2023, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202309/1297553.shtml>. Accessed 12 March 2025.

92 "New Village Super League season aims to boost int'l ties, prosperity." Xinhua News Agency, 7 January 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240107/1e4682c3d13945fca2d25b4698d5a202/c.html>. Accessed 20 February 2025.

93 "China's Village Super League vows to go global in 2028." Xinhua News Agency, 20 June 2024, <https://english.news.cn/20240620/0da9426cd8b24e7494d0ac981a20d848/c.html>. Accessed 20 February 2025.

94 "Rongjiang xian 2019 nian guomin jingji he shehui fazhan jihua zhixing qingkuang ji 2020 nian guomin jingji he shehui fazhan jihua cao'an de baogao" (Report on the implementation of the 2019 Plan for National Economic and Social Development and on the Draft 2020 Plan for National Economic and Social Development of Rongjiang county). Rongjiang Government, 29 September 2020, https://www.rongjiang.gov.cn/zwgk_5903530/zdlyxxgk/fzgh_5903734/gmjshshfzgh/202205/t20220512_74048471.html. Accessed 9 October 2025. Data are drawn from "Lianghui hua zhongdian: jiedu Rongjiang zhengfu gongzuo baogao, touguo shuju kan fazhan" (Two sessions' highlights: decoding the Rongjiang County Government work report: understanding development through data), https://www.rongjiang.gov.cn/xwx_5903512/rjyw_5903513/202602/t20260207_89454687.html. Accessed 8 March 2026.

95 Data from a 2025 internal government report on Guizhou Village Super League.

Table 1. Number of Tourists and Tourism Revenue in Rongjiang County, 2019–2025

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
Number of tourists (million)	3.3	/	6.0	6.7	7.6	9.5	10.38
Tourism revenue (billion yuan)	2.4	/	7.0	7.1	8.4	10.8	11.8

media accounts have capitalized on the Village Super League’s viral impact to market and sell agricultural products online.⁹⁶ In 2023, the county’s total agricultural product sales reached 626 million yuan, with online retail sales amounting to 47.5 million yuan, which is an impressive 112.4 per cent year-on-year growth, the highest in the municipality.

Third, Rongjiang has attracted commercial investments to foster business growth. Since the launch of the Village Super League, the county has added 5,988 new businesses and enterprises, including 123 in the entertainment sector. By 2023, 41 new investment projects had been launched, attracting funding totalling 1.1 billion yuan. The transportation, retail, accommodation and leasing sectors, along with business services, collectively generated 32.1 million yuan in tax revenue in 2023, a 29.8 per cent year-on-year increase, amounting to an additional 7.3 million yuan compared to 2022.⁹⁷

Finally, Rongjiang built up its own brand by establishing the Guizhou Village Super League Cultural and Tourism Development Corporation, which is wholly owned by the Rongjiang County Finance Bureau. The company has registered key trademarks, icons and logos, including “Village Super League” and “Cun FA,” to strengthen its brand identity.⁹⁸ Additionally, it follows an authorized partnership model to generate revenue. For instance, by investing in “Village Super League Cola,” the company not only boosts industrial investment but also supports local agriculture, as the raw materials for the beverage are sourced from local farmers, thereby increasing their income.

Enhancing social cohesion

The Village Super League initiative has had a profound impact on local residents, not only in terms of economic benefits but also in shaping their sense of identity, pride and connection to the larger narrative of their county and the nation. Similar to the viral success of cities such as Harbin, the Village Super League has leveraged the power of short videos to engage residents, bringing them into the spotlight and transforming their everyday lives into celebrated stories. This process has not only reinforced the local image of Rongjiang but also empowered residents by making them active participants in the shaping of their county’s digital identity.

Most short videos about the Village Super League focus on ordinary local people, such as villagers, merchants and taxi drivers, who, through the Village Super League phenomenon, have become part of a larger, more meaningful narrative. By emphasizing this aspect of “livelihood warmth,” these videos evoke pride, happiness and a strong sense of identity with Rongjiang and the Village Super League. These individuals, who previously may have felt invisible, are now portrayed as crucial contributors to the county’s image and success, which cultivates a sense of belonging and importance among the residents. Their actions, whether warmly welcoming tourists or exhibiting exemplary behaviour in business dealings, are highlighted as key factors in the region’s development, reinforcing a collective sense of responsibility and pride.⁹⁹ Through short videos, the residents began to view their personal contributions as integral to the success of their county.¹⁰⁰

96 Interviews with managers from local enterprises and local residents, 22–25 July 2024.

97 Data from a 2025 internal government report on Guizhou Village Super League.

98 Interview with a manager from the corporation, 25 July 2024.

99 There is considerable evidence of the voluntary participation of local villagers. For instance, many villagers donate money to support their players, covering the cost of their supplies and medical expenses, and in order to free up seats for tourists to attend games, some local residents choose to stay at home and watch the matches via live-streaming.

100 Interviews with local residents, 20–25 July 2025.

In essence, the Village Super League case illustrates how the co-production of digital narratives fosters a shared sense of belonging and collective pride, turning emotional identification into a durable form of social capital that underpins local governance and development.¹⁰¹

Reinforcing state narratives

The phenomenon of internet celebrities such as the Village Super League can play a pivotal role in reinforcing state narratives, particularly by blending localized content with national-level goals. The Village Super League, a village football league that went viral, has effectively merged local grassroots culture with national priorities, creating a symbol that aligns with the broader state propaganda. By leveraging popular platforms, the Village Super League helps to push a narrative that portrays rural China as vibrant, innovative and integral to national development. At its core, the Village Super League taps into the state's desire to promote the rural revitalization and modernization of China's less-developed regions.¹⁰²

Internationally, the Village Super League has become a symbol of China's soft power in cultural diplomacy.¹⁰³ Using viral internet content, the Chinese government can project a positive image of rural prosperity worldwide. First, the festival atmosphere of the Village Super League can challenge and reshape international stereotypes about China. In addition, football, as a universal language, has the power to foster emotional connections with other countries and promote non-governmental contact. Third, being situated in an ethnic minority region, the Village Super League offers a unique opportunity to showcase ethnic harmony, with various ethnic minority groups coming together to co-create symbols. Cultural exchange goes beyond the sports spectacle, as it reflects China's modernity, blending traditional rural life with contemporary digital platforms.

The case of the Village Super League demonstrates how local culture and tourism initiatives function as multi-purpose instruments within the Chinese state's broader governance strategy. The massive attention generated by the Village Super League not only enables the local government to explore new sources of revenue but also enhances social cohesion and projects a positive image of China to global audiences.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines how local governments engage in policy innovation by creating internet celebrity cities. Using the case of the Village Super League, we identify policy entrepreneurship as a key driver of this innovation. The local policy entrepreneurs adopted three core strategies: (1) crafting local symbols to shape regional digital identity, (2) co-producing viral content with societal actors, and (3) managing public opinion risks. Moreover, to attain central support, the policy entrepreneurs cooperated with official media to align grassroots experimentation with state discourse. This policy experiment not only promoted local development and strengthened social cohesion but was also leveraged to reinforce state narratives and enhance China's soft power globally.

This study contributes to our understanding of a new model of local development and governance emerging amid China's digital transformation. The diffusion of digital technologies has created an arena where local governments compete not only for material resources but also increasingly for public attention. To enhance visibility, they have turned to viral content, digital storytelling and online platforms as new engines of development. Crucially, this is not only an economic strategy but also a mode of governance: by turning the city's image into a shared asset, local authorities mobilize

101 In our interviews with rural households, residents were proud of the success of the Village Super League and praised the chief executive for launching this strategy.

102 Zou 2022.

103 The event has been covered by international media. See, e.g., "Farmers and students star in China's viral new football league." *BBC News*, 13 September 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c75n4v392wyo>. Accessed 30 December 2024.

and organize residents to co-produce, perform and safeguard that image. We argue that the rise of internet celebrity cities therefore reflects a broader transformation in China's developmental and governance model in the digital era.

In addition, the study reveals local governments' enhanced understanding and capacity to use popular communication. Rather than positioning themselves as top-down and authoritative broadcasters, local governments now operate as facilitators and coordinators, adapting to the participatory and decentralized logic of digital media.¹⁰⁴ They have developed an institutionalized ability to coordinate multi-stakeholder campaigns that engage influencers, enterprises and ordinary residents in the co-creation of viral content. They have also learned to transform fleeting online attention into sustained economic outcomes by promoting tourism investment, digitalizing traditional industries, attracting private capital and strengthening local brands. Overall, this represents distinct state capacities that combine institutional coordination, emotional mobilization and digital economic logic.¹⁰⁵

Lastly, the study contributes to the broader discussion on why and how local innovation persists in China.¹⁰⁶ The Village Super League case illustrates that, in the cultural sphere, local innovation is permitted – and sometimes even encouraged – so long as it stays within safe boundaries. Diverse and vibrant cultural experiments at the local level can effectively capture public attention and, once proven successful, can be incorporated into the national propaganda repertoire as carriers of state ideology. Prior studies have noted that China's propaganda system has become increasingly decentralized;¹⁰⁷ our findings provide a concrete example of how such decentralized cultural innovation can inject vitality into the propaganda system and enhance its overall effectiveness.

While internet celebrity cities have demonstrated strong potential for promoting local development and visibility, their sustainability and broader governance implications warrant critical reflection. For example, ensuring the sustainable development of their culture and tourism industries remains a major challenge. While online popularity can generate short-term visibility and economic gains, it is often difficult to translate viral attention into lasting industrial capacity. The heavy dependence on digital traffic also exposes local governments to the volatility of online trends and platform algorithms, which can quickly shift public attention elsewhere. At the same time, the local government faces greater pressure on its service capacity, including the need to address gaps in public services and infrastructure and to manage potential public safety risks, such as crowd crush incidents. Moreover, excessive commercialization may undermine cultural authenticity and even harm the interests of local residents.

There are certain limitations to this study that open avenues for future research. First, while we highlighted the key mechanisms behind success, future studies could adopt a comparative approach, examining both successful and less successful cases, to refine understanding of the conditions under which these strategies yield desirable outcomes. Second, the proliferation of internet celebrity city strategies may entail challenges, such as audience saturation and shifting public interest. These dynamics underscore the need for continuous adaptation.¹⁰⁸ Future research could explore how local governments in China might recalibrate their approaches in response to the changing trends in digital communication and online engagement.

Data availability. The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

104 Repnikova and Fang 2018.

105 Zhao, Lizhen 2023.

106 Ahlers and Schubert 2022; Heffer and Schubert 2023.

107 Lu et al. 2025.

108 Sullivan, Zhao and Wang 2023.

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