

# **Book Review: Douyin, TikTok and China's Online Screen Industry by Chunmeizi Su**

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Cite as: Schellewald, A. (2024). Book Review: Douyin, TikTok and China's Online Screen Industry by Su Chunmeizi. *Emerging Media*, 2(1), 155–160.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/27523543241238322>

Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) an article published at

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/27523543241238322>

Readers of this journal will likely be familiar with the sister apps of Douyin and TikTok. One of the two is living inside the “Great Firewall” set up by the Chinese government, and the other outside of it. A wider audience, at the very minimum, will likely have heard of the latter, TikTok, and might be aware of the fact that it is the first internationally successful social media platform that has its roots in China. Chunmeizi Su’s recent book *Douyin, TikTok and China’s Online Screen Industry* touches on exactly these dynamics. It provides an empirically grounded analysis of these two sister apps, the contexts in which they exist as distinct apps, and how they are implicated in dynamics of power larger than themselves.

Su opens her book by bringing us back to the late 1990s, and more specifically the so-called “going out” strategy first advanced by the Chinese government back then. This strategy was once envisioned along the lines of cultural soft power, that means, sharing Chinese stories and values around the world (p. 3). However, as Su continues, this early vision seems to have failed in living up to the goals that were set by its strategists. Instead, today it is apps like Douyin and TikTok, and tech giants like ByteDance, that mark a new era in this “going out” strategy. Namely, an era of digital platform power. It is this shift that Su sets as the anchoring point for her analysis of “the most successful cultural export made in China: Douyin and TikTok” (p. 6).

The analysis presented in this book is of both historical and ethnographic nature (p. 7). On the one side, Su analyses, through relevant policy and industry documents, the cultural shifts that have occurred in the Chinese media landscape and internet over the past years – forming the ground from which first Douyin and later TikTok emerged. On the other side, Su shares ethnographic insights from fieldwork with industry practitioners gathered between 2017 and 2022. During her fieldwork, Su engaged with individuals such as platform and algorithm engineers, producers and practitioners from the traditional tv sector, or content creators and

workers from the social media entertainment industry (p. 8). The empirical analysis of these materials is spread across two major parts. Each of these two contains three of the book's six core chapters. In these six chapters, Su tries to provide an answer to the question of "Why China? And why TikTok?" (p. 1).

*The historical and socio-economic context of China's online screen industry*

The first part has the title "Chinese Soil". Within this part of the book, Su starts by discussing the wider global shifts of platformisation and platform capitalism, and positions ByteDance at their very heart. Moreover, it is within this first half of the book that Su analyses the major trends and shifts that occurred in China's media sector over the last years. By doing so, these chapters already provide readers with some answers as to why a popular mobile app like Douyin emerged in China specifically. Su, for example, underlines the mobile-centric attitude within which the Chinese media landscape has been developed, and such a development been supported by government policies (p. 21).

It is on these grounds that ByteDance seized its opportunity, developing mobile applications that were heavily focussed on delivering personalised content experiences through algorithmic recommender systems. Here, Su writes, "a loose legal environment and the capacity to collect and analyse data formed the breeding ground for AI-based algorithms that constitute the core components of ByteDance" (p. 22). At the same time, Su emphasises the complexity of this domestic Chinese context where government institutions seek to strike "a delicate balance between technological advancement and the aggregation of platform power because platforms increasingly pose threats to the well-established political hierarchy" (p. 27). It is on this dimension that Su locates ByteDance as being in a relatively unique position.

Su emphasises that "unlikely its predecessors BAT [Baidu, Alibaba, and Tencent], ByteDance often finds itself at the political crossroads, balancing influence between different

states” (p. 33). It is along these lines – contrasting ByteDance to BAT, and analysing its global expansion – that the book outlines how Douyin and TikTok sit at the heart of global dynamics of power. For example, the book discusses the different business operating model of ByteDance, one focussed on rapid development of mobile applications and utilising creative international marketing strategies (p. 37). This operating model has allowed ByteDance to thrive outside the domestic Chinese market. Yet it also created various challenges that ByteDance subsequently had to navigate with governments like that of India or the United States. It is here, as Su points out, that we come to see a shift, and return, towards strategies of digital sovereignty that threaten the vision of a global and open Internet (p. 39).

On the other side, Su’s book emphasises the dimension of censorship as well as the power exercised by platforms themselves through their content distribution algorithms. In the last chapter of the book’s first half, this is the focus. More specifically, it is within this shift that Su diagnoses ByteDance as a platform capitalist par excellence. ByteDance operates “opaque algorithms to distribute content” and concentrates power within its own company structure so that it can push “creative talents for higher levels of compliance” (p. 38). The consequences of platforms shaping cultural production have, of course, been widely discussed in recent years. Su’s work adds to these debates an interesting angle in that it provides an answer to the question of how creators ended up on these platforms whose rules they now have to follow.

The last chapter of the first half analyses exactly this conundrum. Su unpacks the “migration” of content creators from streaming services to short-video and live streaming platforms that occurred over the last years in China. As she writes, “coupled with other elements, such as the heavy censorship of professional screen content or a mindset of ‘winning the lottery’ like other short-video creators, China’s screen industry has experienced a massive migration of

content creators from the professional field to the ‘in-between’ sectors.” (p. 43). Su sketches this shift by underlining how, at first, online streaming services offered a new creative outlet for many media practitioners. Yet, over time, these very services have come to “resemble online ‘state TV’” and started to place heavy “restrictions on grassroots content, forcing creators to thrive elsewhere” (p. 48).

One key element to the early appeal of streaming services has been the so-called “edge ball” tactic. Such has been “employed by media practitioners to challenge the limits of content censorship” and to grab the attention of online audiences (p. 53). While streaming services have provided a new outlet for creative expression in that way, they also ended up creating a new hierarchical structures, Su writes. Within such, ultimately, “platform support or front-page promotional positioning has proven to be crucial for the survival of content creators“. This has created a condition of overreliance on platforms for media practitioners (p. 57). From this position, and in some sense frustration, Su shows, the appeal of other digital platforms formed. “Despite certain degrees of platform contingency, short-video and live-streaming apps ... allow[ed] grassroots creatives and amateur professionals to expand their content businesses and discover other potentialities” (p. 59).

*The cultural and technological factors shaping Douyin and TikTok’s popularity*

The second half of the book, titled “Leap forward”, turns its attention closer to exactly these new platforms that creators migrated to. It starts with providing a general, historical overview of the different phases in which the short-video field developed not just in China but globally. More specifically, and throughout all of this second part of her book, Su provides us answers to the questions of how Douyin and TikTok ended up on top of this field today. From this angle, Su’s work is insightful for the simple reason that it lays bare the fact that ByteDance’s success was not random or coincidental. Instead, the book demonstrates that Douyin and

TikTok are today the product of up to a decade and more of developments in the field – shaped by the actions of platforms, creators, audiences, and policy makers. It is on this dimension that Su’s work becomes particularly interesting. Drawing on ethnographic data, Su tells this story through the voices of people that have witnessed and enacted this very change.

The first chapter of this second half provides insights that are likely going to be of interest for international readers. That is because Su here analyses the dynamics of the domestic short-video market, as well as providing explanations as to the cultural factors that shaped the meaning and position of Douyin as an app. For example, Su underlines that one “key element to Douyin’s success lies in the growing popularity of subcultural forms such as hip-hop, which is a former underground culture that has long been excluded from the mainstream” (p. 67). Although emerging from such subcultural forms, Su goes on to discuss how Douyin today differentiates itself on the domestic market as a “entertainment-based video encyclopaedia that evolved from lip-syncing, offering an array of professionalised content (facilitated by MCNs [Multi-channel networks])” (p. 71).

This positionality is crucial to consider, especially when looking at Douyin’s key competitor on the domestic Chinese market, Kuaishou. Su writes that “Kuaishou gained market dominance in third- and fourth-tier cities, namely China’s rural areas, when Douyin was still in its infancy” (p. 73). Other than Douyin, Kuaishou operates its platform’s algorithm differently, giving opportunity “higher levels of exposure for long-tail content, making the platform less useful and attractive for celebrities” (p. 73). By outlining these cultural nuances, their relationship to platform and algorithm design, yet also Chinese culture and policy initiatives, Su develops a rich understanding for the identity of Douyin as a short-video app.

This analysis is continued by turning, in the next chapter, towards the question of how Douyin and TikTok differ – namely, “in content, culture and politics” (p. 90). Su emphasises

that one part to the success of Douyin, and other domestic Chinese apps, has been the boost they received through international competition being shut out” (p. 80). Yet, other than merely replicating Douyin’s success internationally, Su analyses how TikTok was marketed in a way that ended up giving the app a unique cultural profile compared to Douyin. More so, factors such as censorship on the Chinese market as well as its advanced e-commerce infrastructure shape the path of the two sister apps in differently.

Su mentions that, for example, “gendered materials are less common on Douyin than on TikTok because of the diverging degrees of content censorship” (p. 91). Similarly, she highlights that the differing contexts of e-commerce infrastructure shaped the identities of the two apps in the way that Douyin “has more commercial-oriented content” whereas TikTok, on the other side, “is focused mainly on entertainment-oriented content and has fewer brand promotions” (p. 91). Su explains these differences in further detail by pointing out facts such as the difference in physical retail infrastructures that exist on the domestic Chinese market and elsewhere, such as the United States (p. 98).

In considering these cultural, political, economic factors, Su provides valuable insights that explain TikTok’s identity and positionality as an app next to that of Douyin and the wider short-video market. More so, Su argues that “these contexts indicate that Douyin and TikTok have diverging trajectories, which makes them ‘two souls in one shell’” (p. 103). Closing this second part, Su turns to what these two souls share in common, however. That is, an algorithmic infrastructure through which content and user interactions are facilitated. Here the book again provides interesting insights, especially because it draws on interviews and conversation with ByteDance engineers that worked on these very algorithms and platform infrastructures.

Through these first hand insights, the last chapter of the second part provides readers with a rich understanding for the overall design of the platform's algorithms, the way in which topics such as ad placements and content moderation are thought about by engineers, as well as the implications these systems have for not just creators but people and questions of privacy more broadly. Most crucially, Su unpacks these technological details from a socio-technical perspective. She argues that "algorithms are a component within the broader platform ecosystem. They are a thread that connects content, users, platforms and advertisers" (p. 121). As scholarly and public interest in algorithms is at an all time high, arguments that remind us of the embeddedness of such systems are vital. It is from this position that Su's book demonstrates how ByteDance has come to operate a powerful infrastructure mediating social and cultural life online – doing so not in a vacuum but by constantly negotiating its platform's position, for example with policy makers.

### *Conclusion*

In the end, and on a larger scale, this book then does a number of things. It serves us as an important reminder that there are no simple answers to complex questions. Su does so by mapping the various dynamics and forms of power – cultural, economic, political, technological – within which Douyin and TikTok are involved. It is by confronting this complexity, laying it out, and trying to untangle the various relationships, that Su's book offers a nuanced view on the two sister apps of Douyin and TikTok. By doing this with an eye for historical developments, the book furthermore underlines that the status quo is not a given, and that change is, consequently, a constant.

Douyin, TikTok and China's Online Screen Industry thus ultimately speaks on the potential that the internet holds as an infrastructure for social and cultural life. That is why the book will not only be of interest to those eager to learn more about the two sister apps or the

Chinese media landscape more generally. Rather, it will be of interest for a wider readership. Written in an accessible way, it provides interesting perspectives for anyone looking to better understand why things are as they are today, and what lies ahead in the future of an open and global internet. The book opens these perspectives by simultaneously highlighting the interactive, democratising, and grassroots potentials of the internet, as well as the many challenges we are faced with today in fully realising these potentials.