

Article

TikTok Refugees, Digital Migration, and the Expanding Affordances of Xiaohongshu (RedNote) for Informal Language Learning

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Abstract

The mass influx of English-speaking “TikTok refugees” to Xiaohongshu (also known as RedNote) has not only reshaped Xiaohongshu into a dynamic space for intercultural exchange but has also unlocked a wealth of opportunities for informal language learning within an integrated, accessible, and engaging translingual and transcultural digital ecosystem. Building upon the theoretical construct of language learning affordances (Barton & Potts, 2013; van Lier, 2004), this article examines how the emergent features of Xiaohongshu, catalyzed by digital mass migration, can be harnessed as valuable resources to support informal language learning. Focusing on a sample of 40 English-speaking content creators who self-identified as TikTok Refugees on Xiaohongshu, we gathered data comprising 120 bilingual posts and their associated commenting areas through hashtag and keyword tracking (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). A qualitative content analysis of the collected data revealed three key patterns of affordances: naturalistic language communication through platform-mediated authentic interactions and role-reversal dynamics; community-building learning features through collaborative atmosphere and mentorship networks; and identity development processes oriented toward a “global village” imaginary. While our analysis focuses on Chinese EFL (English as a foreign language) learners, the findings have broader implications for understanding how unexpected digital migration can transform social media platforms into vibrant spaces for bilateral language learning, including both English and Chinese as second languages. The article finally points out strategies for pedagogically leveraging these affordances as bridging activities (Thorne & Reinhardt, 2008) across formal and informal contexts.

Keywords

TikTok refugees, digital migration, language learning, Xiaohongshu (RedNote), informal digital learning of English

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1 Framing the Issue

In the wake of a potential ban on TikTok in the United States due to national security concerns, a substantial digital migration has emerged, with over three million self-described English-speaking “TikTok refugees” flocking to the Chinese social media platform Xiaohongshu (also known as RedNote) in search of a new online home (Kan, 2025). This unprecedented movement has created a remarkable phenomenon: a rare moment of direct contact between Chinese and English-speaking social media users typically separated by China’s Great Firewall and distinct digital ecosystems. Consequently, this mass migration is transforming Xiaohongshu from a predominantly Chinese platform into a dynamic space for cross-cultural interaction. Although Chinese internet users have historically had limited opportunities for authentic online English communication with others from linguistically and culturally different backgrounds due to the unavailability of international platforms (Liu, 2023a; Zhang & Liu, 2024), the recent influx of English-speaking users to Xiaohongshu may generate novel affordances for informal digital learning of English among Chinese people. The platform, which integrates Instagram-like social media features with e-commerce functionality and TikTok-style recommendation algorithms (Huang & Miao, 2024), has organically evolved into an impromptu space for bilateral language exchanges and intercultural encounters (Tan & Wang, 2025).

This digital migration of “TikTok refugees” to Xiaohongshu exemplifies a unique moment where technology has spontaneously facilitated language learning opportunities that transcend traditional classroom boundaries (Chun, 2016). While existing research has examined how social media platforms can support informal language learning (Chik, 2020; Lee, 2023; Liu & Darvin, 2024), these studies have predominantly focused on international platforms like Facebook, characterized by well-established multilingual and multicultural online communities. In contrast, the Xiaohongshu phenomenon stands out as it illustrates the spontaneous evolution of a largely Chinese-speaking digital space into a vibrant hub of intercultural exchange. This transformation offers unique ecological conditions to examine how spontaneous digital migration can create new spaces for developing not just communicative competence but also autonomous and self-directed language learning through authentic intercultural digital literacy practices.

This paper emphasizes the importance of examining how the digital migration of Xiaohongshu, a popular social media platform, has reshaped its affordances for Chinese learners of English. By focusing on affordances, the present study seeks to explore the opportunities and resources that Xiaohongshu provides for language learning within its digital ecosystem. The concept of affordances, as theorized by scholars such as Barton and Potts (2013) and van Lier (2004), highlights the interaction between learners and their environment, emphasizing how specific tools, features, and contexts can support or hinder language acquisition. Understanding these affordances is crucial for identifying how Xiaohongshu enables learners to engage with authentic language materials, participate in meaningful interactions, and develop their English proficiency in a way that aligns with their personal goals and learning needs. With this theoretical framework in mind, the present study aims to address the following research question (RQ):

RQ: Given the digital mass migration of “TikTok refugees” to Xiaohongshu, what new affordances does the platform present for Chinese informal language learners of English?

2 Social Media Platforms and Informal Digital Learning of English

The ubiquity of digital technologies combined with English’s status as a global lingua franca has established informal digital learning of English (IDLE) as a worldwide learning phenomenon. IDLE refers to autonomous, self-directed learning activities that occur outside formal educational

contexts through digital platforms and online resources (Liu et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2025). Research has consistently demonstrated IDLE's significant contributions to second and foreign language (L2) development, particularly in enhancing linguistic competence, learner motivation, and affective engagement with the target language (Lee & Dressman, 2018; Liu, 2024; Soyoof et al., 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2024).

Social media platforms have emerged as crucial sites for IDLE by facilitating authentic language use through real-world interactions among diverse English speakers across the globe (Benson, 2015; Chik, 2020; Lee, 2023; Liu, 2025). Empirical investigations have illuminated multiple dimensions of social media's role in informal language learning. For instance, studies of Facebook-mediated learning have revealed how digital social networks foster collaborative learning beyond classroom boundaries while serving as vital support systems for sharing language learning experiences (Peeters, 2015). Subsequently, platforms like Instagram and TikTok have introduced additional affordances through their emphasis on multimodality, mobility, and instantaneous interaction (Lee, 2023). These technological features enable innovative approaches to L2 development by creating unique opportunities for creative language expression and intercultural exchange in naturalistic contexts. Particularly relevant to the present study is recent scholarship examining how Chinese language learners leverage social media platforms to transcend traditional learning constraints (Liu, 2023a, 2023b; Liu & Darvin, 2024). Liu and Darvin's (2024) investigation of rural Chinese EFL students' participation in international platforms like Quora and Facebook demonstrated how digital spaces enable learners to reconstruct their linguistic identities and develop autonomous learning practices regardless of their social backgrounds (e.g., rural versus urban). Their findings illustrate how social media environments can empower informal English learners to act against a sense of shame caused by geographical and socioeconomic differences, facilitating the development of confident English-speaking identities through self-directed engagement with global online communities.

While these studies have provided valuable insights into how international social media platforms support informal English learning, the unprecedented digital migration of English speakers to Xiaohongshu presents a unique opportunity to examine how a predominantly Chinese platform can be transformed into a space for informal English learning through spontaneous transcultural and translingual interactions. Understanding how this unexpected transformation of Xiaohongshu creates novel contexts and opportunities for IDLE is precisely where the empirical significance of the present study lies.

3 Affordances as the Theoretical Foundation

The concept of affordance is widely applied across various disciplines, with its meaning often shaped by the specific context in which it is used. Anderson and Robey (2017) describe affordance as a characteristic or attribute of a technology that signals potential actions users can perform with it. Taking a more interaction-focused approach, Shin (2022) explains affordance as a set of cues or signals that guide users on how to engage with technological tools. Essentially, affordances serve as indicators—whether through the object itself or its surrounding context—that reveal how something can be utilized or navigated. Originally conceptualized by Gibson (1979), affordances refer to what the environment provides to a particular organism (e.g., learner), so it emphasizes the relationship between environmental features and an organism's needs and perceptions. Building on this foundation, van Lier (2004) reconceptualizes affordance in L2 education as “a relationship between an organism (e.g., a learner) and the environment that signals an opportunity for or inhibition of action” (p. 4). Within this framework, the learning environment provides possibilities for action that facilitate engagement and participation, stimulating intersubjective interaction and linguistic development. The concept of affordances thus comprises potential learning resources available in the environment, with actual learning contingent upon learners' agentive engagement with these resources, including language (van Lier, 2004).

This conceptualization chimes with Barton and Potts's (2013) application of affordances to digital environments. They highlight how digitally mediated spaces provide language learners with both linguistic and non-linguistic resources for learning. Barton and Pott (2013) also emphasize that affordances emerge from users' recognition and activation of potential learning opportunities in relation to specific digital resources. Significantly, their approach extends beyond traditional linguistic affordances to encompass the full spectrum of learning possibilities inherent in digital environments.

Additionally, the concept of affordances is closely intertwined with sociocultural theory's notion of mediation in L2 development (Lantolf, 2000; Thorne, 2008). While affordances represent potential opportunities for action in the environment, these opportunities are realized through various forms of mediation — whether technological (the platform's features), social (interaction with other users), or linguistic (language use itself). In the case of Xiaohongshu, the platform's technological features mediate how affordances for language learning are perceived and utilized by Chinese IDLE learners, while social interaction with “TikTok refugees” provides another layer of mediation that transforms these affordances into actual learning opportunities. Anchored in these theoretical perspectives, our research employs an ecological concept of affordances (Barton & Potts, 2013; van Lier, 2004) to analyze how the mass migration of TikTok refugees to Xiaohongshu creates additional opportunities for Chinese IDLE learners. The present study investigates both the potential opportunities that have emerged in Xiaohongshu following the influx of TikTok refugees and how Chinese IDLE learners perceive and harness these affordances for language learning purposes.

4 The Present Study

The present study employed a qualitative approach to analyze public data from Xiaohongshu posts and associated comments. Data collection occurred in January 2025, utilizing hashtag and keyword tracking as methods to examine content trends and usage patterns (Lee, 2023; Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017). The data collection process continued until theoretical saturation was reached in terms of post variety and interaction patterns.

The primary data collection utilized Xiaohongshu's search functionality, focusing initially on the hashtag #tiktokrefugee, which generated 25.4 million posts with 1.68 billion views. Through iterative examination of these posts, we identified additional relevant hashtags: #refugee (2.4M posts, 135.3M views), #tiktokban (6.0M posts, 347.2M views), and #rednote (1.2M posts, 81.5M views)¹. From this corpus, we systematically selected 120 posts involving more than 40 distinct “TikTok refugees” for detailed analysis, saving them to the first author's account for subsequent examination. The selection of posts followed multiple criteria to ensure data quality and relevance. First, posts were required to demonstrate high engagement levels through their prominence in search rankings. Second, the content needed to feature predominantly English-language communication with rich commenting sections, thus providing sufficient interactive data for analysis. Finally, posts were selected based on evidence of sustained bilateral engagement between content creators and Chinese audiences, moving beyond mere unidirectional commenting to capture authentic intercultural interactions.

Our analysis was informed by a multimodal and qualitative content-analysis approach (Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017), utilizing both textual and visual data. The basic unit of analysis consisted of screenshots capturing both posts and their associated comments that demonstrated potential relevance to our research question. In total, 412 screenshots were systematically collected and archived. From these screenshots, we extracted salient comments and post text as primary textual data for subsequent analysis. The analysis followed an inductive approach using NVivo 12 to facilitate systematic coding and theme development. Initial coding was conducted without predetermined categories, allowing

patterns to emerge organically from the data. The multimodal nature of the screenshots was preserved throughout the analysis process, with visual elements being referenced alongside textual data to provide richer contextual understanding when necessary. The analytical process was iterative, with emerging patterns being continuously refined through engagement with our theoretical construct of affordances and our focus on language learning. This iterative analysis involved multiple rounds of coding, pattern identification, and theoretical interpretation. This process allowed us to maintain theoretical sensitivity while grounding our findings in the empirical data.

5 Findings

Our analysis revealed three key patterns of affordances that Xiaohongshu creates for informal English learning following the TikTok refugee influx (see the Appendix for detailed supporting themes and codes). First, the platform facilitates naturalistic English communication and increases Chinese learners' exposure to English through social media-mediated authentic interactions, unique role-reversal dynamics, and its support for online bilingual literacy practices. Second, it enables community-building learning features through collaborative ecosystems and mentorship networks. Third, it catalyzes identity development processes oriented toward the pursuit of a "global village" imaginary, where Chinese users transition from language learners to confident intercultural communicators. In what follows, we provide detailed examples illustrating how these affordances manifest in user interactions and content creation practices.

5.1 Naturalistic English communication environment

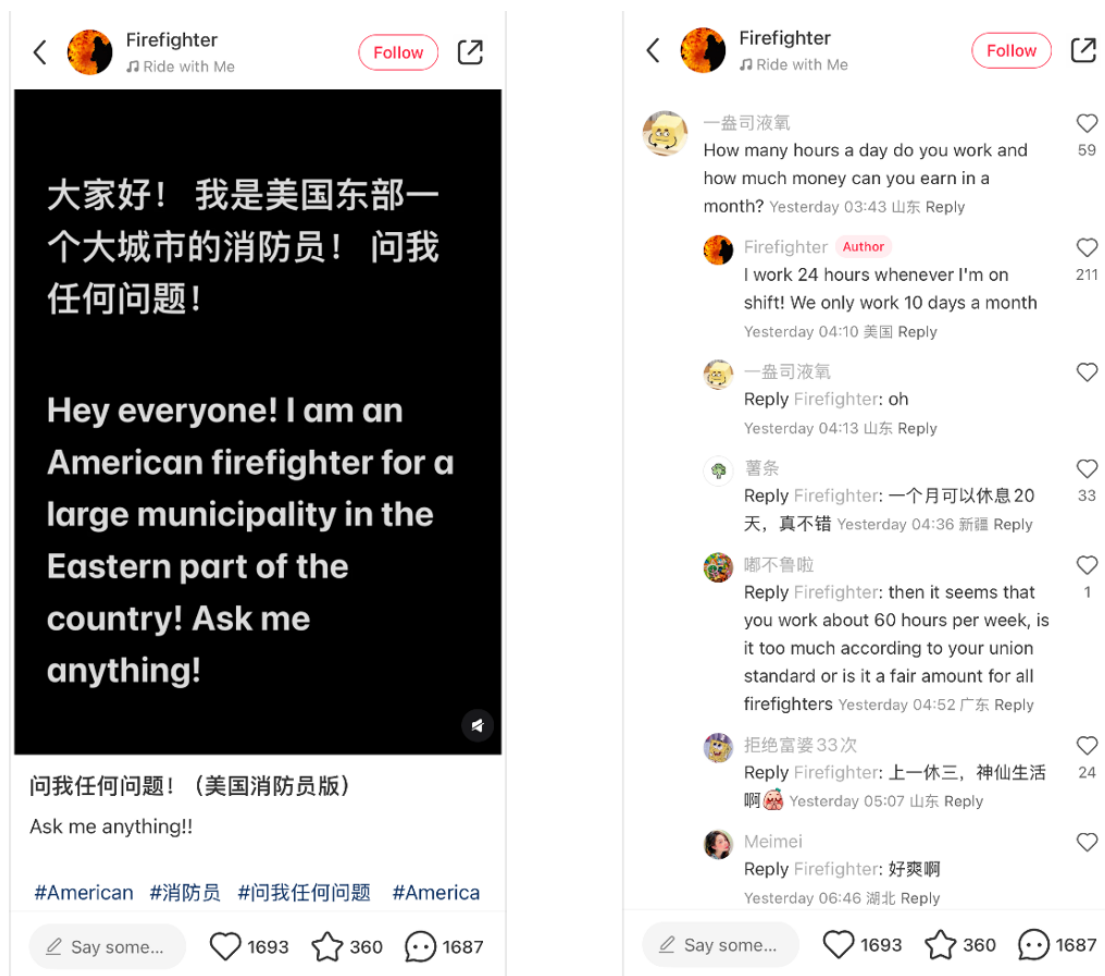
The analysis of posts and comments reveals how the influx of English-speaking users has transformed the online linguistic landscape of Xiaohongshu, fostering an environment that encourages authentic language exchanges and challenges the traditional roles found in online language learning applications, which often prioritize mastery of form over meaning. One of the most remarkable aspects of this phenomenon is the emergence of platform-mediated authentic English interactions, which has significantly increased Chinese users' exposure to the English language. As accounted in the post of one Chinese user:

一觉醒来发现到处都是外国人的帖子和英语。感觉多年未用的英语可以捡起来了。我也好好试试不出国就跟老外讲英语的机会 [😁]。[I woke up to find posts and English everywhere from foreigners. It's time to dust off my unused English from years past and seize the opportunity to speak English with foreigners without needing to travel abroad]. (Post 62)

In addition, the platform's interactive features, such as the commenting system, enable spontaneous discussions about the life and cultural experiences between Chinese and newly arrived foreign users. Figure 1 showcases a lively interaction between an American firefighter and Chinese audience members. The firefighter's bilingual introduction sparks an authentic discussion about working conditions and salaries in the United States. Chinese users eagerly ask questions such as "*How many hours a day do you work and how much money can you earn in a month?*" The firefighter's responses provide valuable insights into work-life balance and remuneration, offering Chinese users genuine language input in a real-world context. The exchange in Figure 1 exemplifies how the presence of English-speaking users on Xiaohongshu creates opportunities for Chinese learners to engage in meaningful, real-life conversations. By asking questions and participating in discussions about topics that interest them, such as working hours and salaries, Chinese users can practice their English skills in an authentic context while simultaneously negotiating valuable cultural knowledge about foreign countries.

Figure 1

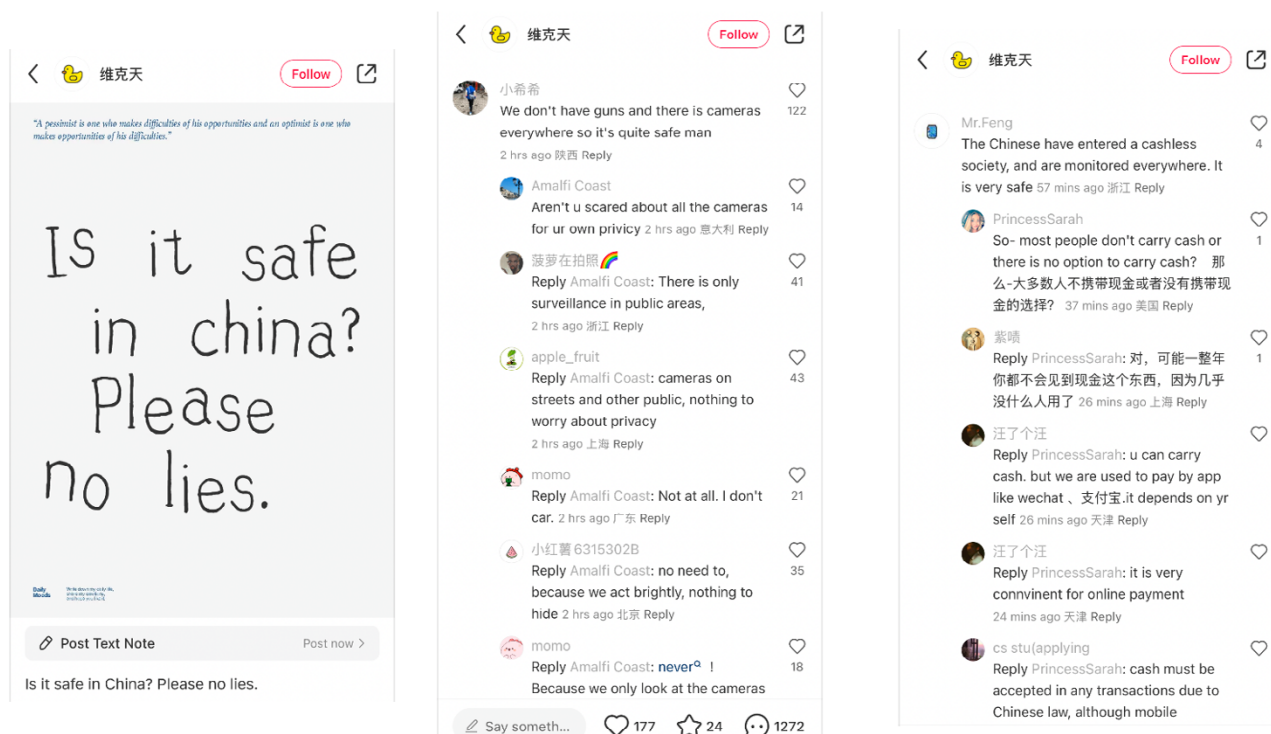
The Interactions between the American Firefighter and the Audience Members.



Another significant aspect of the Xiaohongshu phenomenon is the emergence of role-reversal communication practices. Traditionally, Chinese users have been positioned as language learners in online interactions with English speakers. However, the Xiaohongshu environment has flipped this dynamic, with Chinese users taking on the role of language and cultural experts. Figure 2 exemplifies this role reversal, where a TikTok refugee poses a question about safety in China, seeking genuine responses from the Chinese community. The post, titled “*Is it safe in China? Please no lies,*” receives numerous comments from Chinese users who confidently explain the cultural context and address misconceptions about safety in their country. One user writes, “*We don’t have guns and there is cameras everywhere so its quite safe man.*” Another user adds, “*The Chinese have entered a cashless society, and are monitored everywhere. It is very safe.*” By leveraging their linguistic and cultural expertise, Chinese users guide English speakers through issues that require an insider perspective to address. This role reversal may empower Chinese users to actively contribute to the English communication/literacy process, not just as learners but also as individuals who have knowledge and expertise about the discussed topic. It creates a more balanced and reciprocal language exchange environment where both Chinese and English speakers can benefit from each other’s knowledge and experiences. As Chinese users engage in authentic exchanges and take on the role of language and cultural experts, they not only enhance their language skills but also cultivate a sense of agency and confidence in their ability to communicate effectively in English.

Figure 2

A TikTok Refugee Seeking Genuine Information about Safety in China.

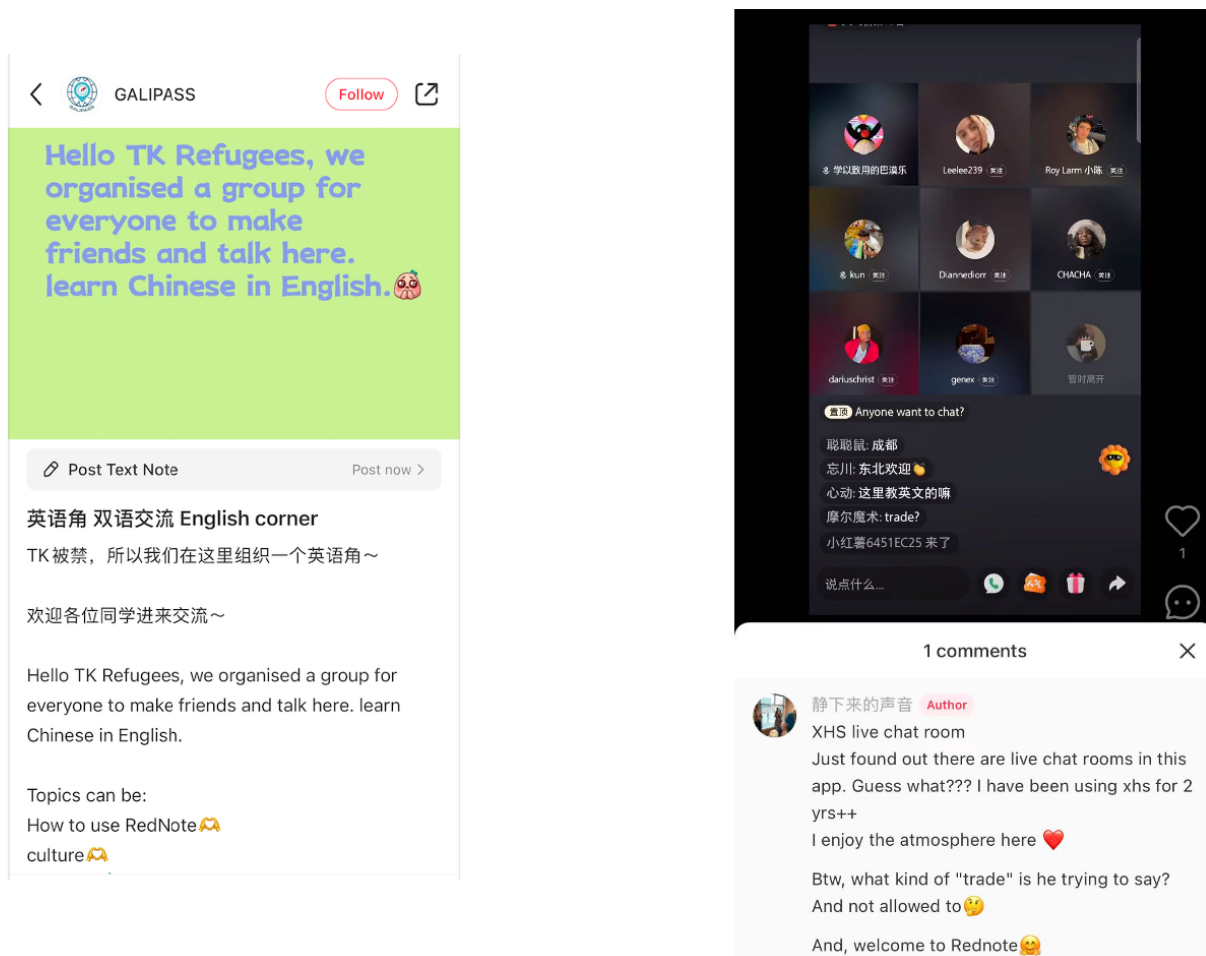


5.2 Community-building learning features

Our analysis also reveals how user interactions in the naturalistic English communication environment were able to evolve into systematic community-building learning features on Xiaohongshu. This pattern comprises two distinct yet interconnected themes collaborative learning atmosphere and mentorship support networks. The collaborative learning atmosphere manifests prominently in how users strategically create and maintain learning communities. Figure 3 (left) illustrates this through a post specifically designed to establish an English corner², where the user writes, “*Hello TK Refugees, we organized a group for everyone to make friends and talk here, learn Chinese in English.*” The bilingual framing of this invitation, combined with its warm and inclusive tone, illustrates how users proactively create structured English-speaking spaces on Xiaohongshu. This post exemplifies the community’s deliberate efforts to establish online communities of practice dedicated to English learning and fostering friendships between Chinese learners and English speakers from other backgrounds. The right side of Figure 3 shows the resultant chat room interface, demonstrating how these community-building efforts materialize into active learning spaces where users engage in real-time bilingual communication. These community features extend beyond mere language exchange to encompass broader cultural understanding. The live chat room shown in Figure 3 captures active discussions where users negotiate meaning across languages, ask for clarification (“Btw, what kind of ‘trade’ is he trying to say?”), and create a supportive environment for bilingual learning (“I enjoy the atmosphere here ❤️”).

Figure 3

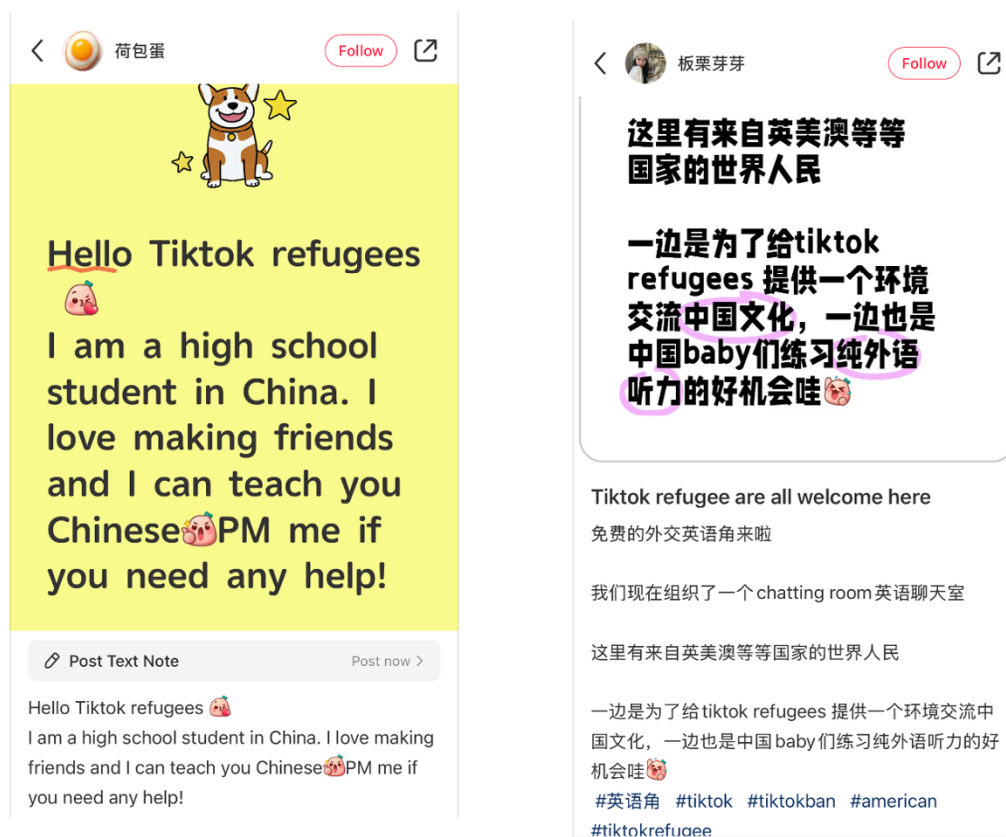
Left: A Post That Looks for TikTok Refugees to Form an English Corner for Free Talk and Construct Friendships; Right: A Screenshot of an Online Bilingual Communication Chatroom on Xiaohongshu.



The development of mentorship and support networks is particularly evident in Figure 4 (left), where Chinese users actively position themselves as language learning partners. One high school student's post reads "Hello Tiktok refugees 🙌🏻 I am a high school student in China, I love making friends and I can teach you Chinese 🙌🏻🙌🏻 PM me if you need any help!" This invitation for mentorship demonstrates how users create opportunities for reciprocal language learning relationships. Notably, the data demonstrate that users' development of mentorship and support networks builds upon a sophisticated understanding of platform technical affordances to build these learning communities. The right screenshot in Figure 4 shows the strategic use of hashtags like #英语角 (English Corner) and #american, revealing how users leverage the platform's algorithmic design to enhance visibility and connect with potential learning partners. The post's bilingual format and structured presentation "一边是为了给 tiktok refugees 提供一个环境交流中国文化, 一边也是中国 baby 们练习纯外语听力的好机会哇" [On one hand, it provides an environment for TikTok refugees to exchange Chinese culture, and on the other hand, it's also a great opportunity for Chinese babies to practice pure foreign language listening skills! Wow.] indicates the contributor's careful consideration of how to create an accessible and engaging learning community within the sociotechnical structure of Xiaohongshu.

Figure 4

Posts That Recruit TikTok Refugees as Bilingual Learning Mentors and Collaborators for Online English Communication.



5.3 Identity development and the imagination of global village

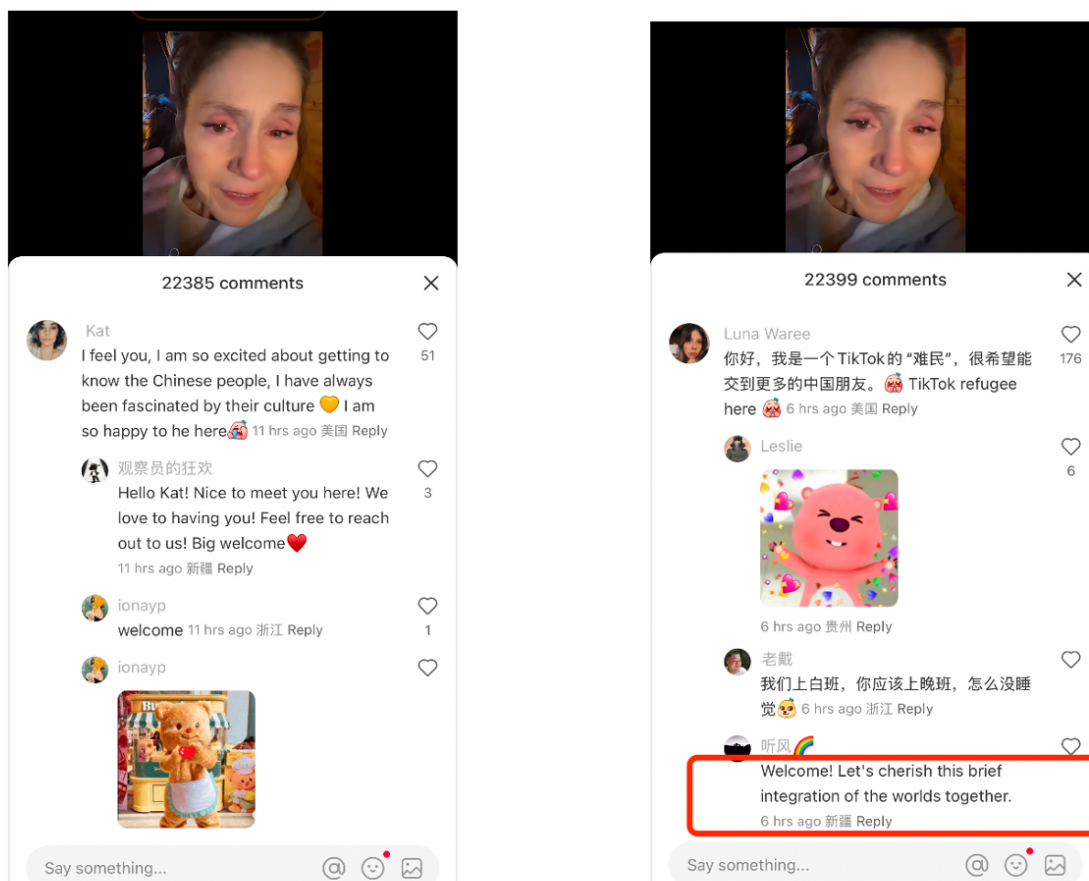
Beyond the communication of meaning and construction of relationships in English, Xiaohongshu has emerged as a transformative space where Chinese users develop new identities, from social media users and L2 English learners to L2 Chinese teachers, and pursue their vision of a global village. Our analysis reveals how Xiaohongshu enables users to transition from traditional language learners to confident intercultural communicators while fostering a collective imagination of global connectivity. Specifically, Xiaohongshu opens up unprecedented opportunities for Chinese users to perform diverse English-mediated identities, positioning themselves as confident English speakers, bilingual content creators, and intercultural ambassadors. This identity transformation is evident in user-generated content, such as the following post:

太爽了！作为一个英语学习者，我们终于也有机会用英语去教老外一些中国文化和知识了，而不是课本里的机械对话。咱就是说咱也是自信的中华文化传播者了 😊 [This is awesome! As an English learner, we finally have the opportunity to use English to teach foreigners about Chinese culture and knowledge, instead of the mechanical dialogues in textbooks. We can confidently say that we are also confident disseminators of Chinese culture 😊] (Post 178)

This user expresses their excitement about the newfound ability to use English to share Chinese culture with foreigners, moving beyond the limitations of textbook dialogues. By embracing their role as “confident disseminators of Chinese culture,” the user exemplifies the identity shift from passive language learner to active intercultural communicator.

The pursuit of a “global village” imaginary particularly manifests in users’ emotional investment in cross-cultural connections. Figure 5 captures this sentiment powerfully through the interaction between a TikTok refugee and Chinese users. When the American user, who self-identifies as “not-college-educated,” shares her excitement about connecting with people in the East, Chinese users respond with profound empathy. One comment, “Welcome! Let’s cherish this brief integration of the worlds together,” reflects a collective aspiration for global connections that transcend educational, cultural, and geographical boundaries.

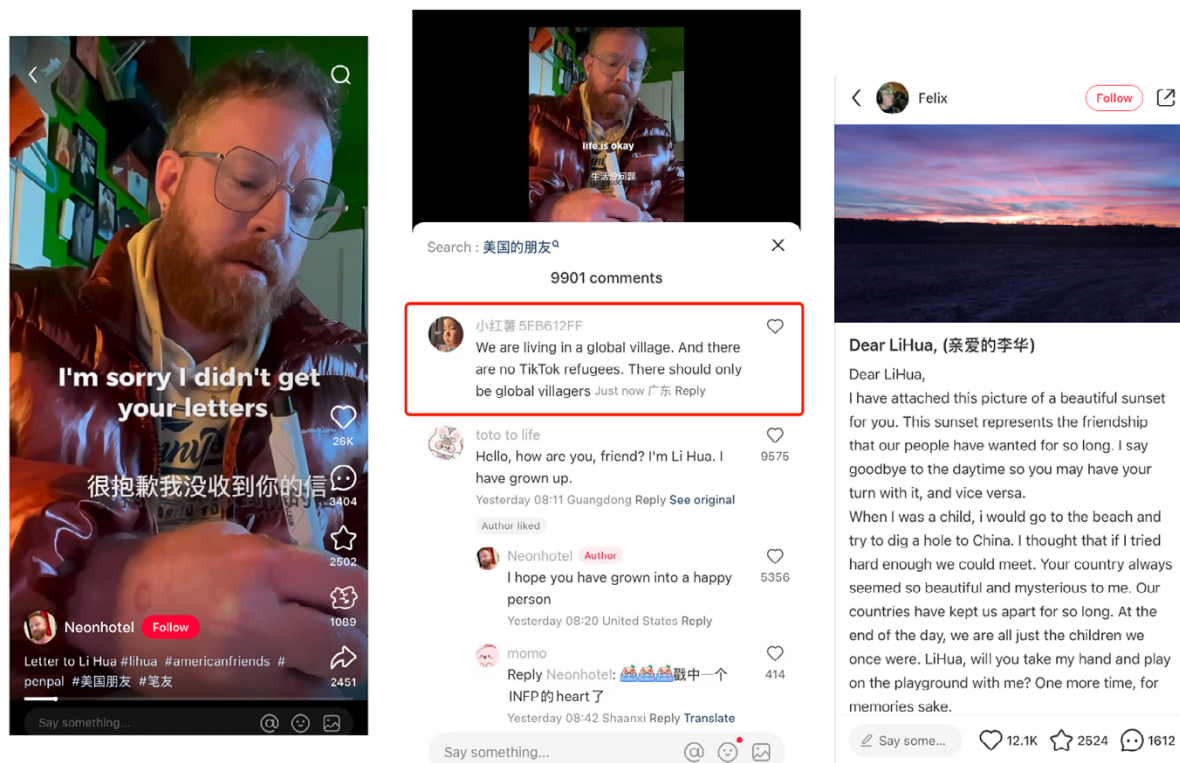
Figure 5
The Commenting Area of a TikTok Refugee’s Self-sharing.



The case of Lihua in Figure 6 particularly accounts for how Xiaohongshu transforms abstract aspirations for global connectivity into tangible reality. Lihua, a fictional character from Chinese English textbooks who traditionally received no replies to his letters, becomes a powerful symbol of changing times. The emotional responses from TikTok refugees who write back to Lihua represent more than just replies to fictional letters – they symbolize the bridging of a long-standing communication gap. As one Chinese user poignantly notes, “We are living in a global village. And there are no TikTok refugees. There should only be global villagers.” Such reflections suggest a transformation from seeing foreigners as distant “others” to viewing them as fellow members of an interconnected global community. In this sense, this reimagining of global relationships through Xiaohongshu demonstrates how digital spaces can catalyze both individual identity development and collective social imagination. Users are not merely learning English; they are actively constructing and performing new identities while participating in the creation of a more connected global digital ecosystem.

Figure 6

The Interactions Between Lihua and His “Foreign Pen Pals”.



6 Discussion

In response to the research question regarding what new affordances Xiaohongshu presents for Chinese informal language learners of English following the digital migration of TikTok refugees, our study reveals three distinct yet interconnected patterns of affordances. First, the platform facilitates naturalistic English communication environments through platform-mediated authentic interactions and role reversal dynamics, where Chinese users transition from language learners to cultural experts and platform guides. Second, Xiaohongshu enables the formation of community-building learning features manifested in collaborative learning atmospheres and mentorship networks that support sustained language development. Third, and perhaps most significantly, the platform opens up spaces for identity development and the pursuit of a “global village” imaginary, where Chinese users not only develop confident bilingual identities but also actively participate in constructing meaningful cross-cultural connections.

These findings contribute to the existing understanding of the relationship between social media and informal language learning across languages and contexts. While prior literature has identified how language learners may benefit from participating in out-of-class communication practices on international platforms such as YouTube (Benson, 2015), Facebook (Chik, 2020), TikTok, and Instagram (Lee, 2023), this research breaks new ground by examining how a Chinese domestic platform can be transformed into a vibrant space for informal English learning through unexpected digital migration. Against the backdrop of the TikTok ban and subsequent user migration, Xiaohongshu is developing its own distinctive “culture of use” (Thorne, 2008) that presents unique affordances for language learning. Unlike international platforms where English serves as a lingua franca and Chinese users often position themselves as language learners seeking opportunities to practice English (Liu & Darvin, 2024), Xiaohongshu’s transformation has created a more balanced and equitable linguistic ecology. In this space, Chinese users alternate between roles as language learners and cultural experts, challenging traditional power dynamics

in online language learning. This finding extends Thorne's (2016) conceptualization of "culture of use" by demonstrating how unexpected digital migration can catalyze the emergence of new cultural patterns and social practices that redefine the relationship between majority and minority language users in digital spaces. Furthermore, while previous studies have primarily focused on how individual learners leverage social media for language practice (Lee, 2023; Liu, 2023a, 2023b), our findings reveal how collective digital migration can reshape an entire platform's affordances for language learning, creating opportunities for community-building learning and identity development that go beyond individual linguistic gains. From a theoretical perspective, this highlights the importance of affordances as socially constructed opportunities that arise from the interaction between users and the digital environment. The platform's design features, such as the commenting system and user-generated content, enable these affordances to materialize, transforming Xiaohongshu into a space where language learning is embedded in authentic, meaningful communication.

The findings also advance our understanding of how ecological CALL (computer-assisted language learning) environments can foster symbolic competence among IDLE learners. The case of Xiaohongshu elaborates on how digital migration can create spaces where learners develop not just linguistic competence but also the ability to "shape the very context in which the language is learned and used" (Kramsch, 2011, p. 664). This is particularly evident in how Chinese users actively transformed the platform's linguistic landscape through three key practices. First, they were able to utilize the platform's bilingual elements and interactive features to participate in transcultural and translanguaging practices. For instance, the case of "Lihua" demonstrates how Chinese users and the "TikTok refugees" creatively repurposed a traditional textbook character to facilitate out-of-class cross-cultural dialogue, which is reminiscent of what Kramsch and Whiteside (2008) describe as "the ability to actively manipulate and shape one's environment on multiple scales (p. 667)." Second, Chinese users' development of symbolic competence is manifested in their navigation of technologized forms of language. The data reveals how users skillfully combine different semiotic resources — from hashtags to emojis, from bilingual captions to interactive features — to construct meaning across linguistic and cultural boundaries. This aligns with the ecological CALL perspective that language learners must develop "cultural know-how for dealing with technologized forms of language" beyond traditional linguistic competence.

Most significantly, the emergence of the "global village" imaginary on Xiaohongshu highlights the importance of "imagined communities" — spaces where learners envision themselves as legitimate participants in future multilingual worlds (Norton & Pavlenko, 2019) — in L2 development and identity expansion. The present study demonstrates that users do not merely exchange language; they actively construct and negotiate meaning about their shared digital space, exemplified by comments like "Let's cherish this brief integration of the worlds together." The case of Lihua further illustrates how users collectively imagine and work toward a global community that transcends traditional linguistic and cultural boundaries. This transformation of Xiaohongshu into an imagined global village demonstrates how digital spaces can support both the development of symbolic competence and the construction of imagined communities where learners envision and enact new possibilities for cross-cultural connection. From a theoretical standpoint, this underscores the role of affordances in enabling collaborative learning and the formation of social networks. The platform's technical features, combined with users' agency, create opportunities for sustained engagement and mutual support, highlighting the social and interactional dimensions of affordances, where learning is seen as a collaborative and community-driven process. Affordances are not only opportunities for action but also opportunities for redefining roles and relationships in language learning. By positioning themselves as cultural experts, Chinese users actively participate in the co-construction of knowledge, fostering a sense of agency and confidence. This aligns with van Lier's (2004) view of affordances as opportunities for action that are shaped by the learner's agency and the sociocultural context. Affordances extend beyond immediate opportunities for action to include possibilities for identity construction and social imagination. By engaging in authentic exchanges and performing new roles, users not only enhance their language skills but also reimagine their place in

a global, interconnected world, aligning with van Lier's (2004) view of affordances as opportunities for identity development and social participation.

Echoing what Thorne and Reinhardt (2008) envision as bridging activities that connect formal instruction with real-world language practices, the present study suggests several implications for future pedagogical considerations. First, language instructors could integrate authentic content from Xiaohongshu's bilingual interactions into classroom activities. For instance, the role reversal dynamics observed in platform navigation tutorials could be repurposed as classroom tasks where students practice explaining technical or cultural concepts in English, thereby developing both linguistic skills and intercultural competence. Second, the community-building features of Xiaohongshu could inform the design of collaborative learning activities. Teachers might encourage students to participate in or create their own "English corners" on the platform, where classroom learning objectives can be reinforced through authentic interactions with English speakers. The Lihua case demonstrates how creative storytelling and letter-writing activities can bridge classroom exercises with meaningful intercultural communication. Finally, the platform's affordances for identity development suggest opportunities for project-based learning. Students could be guided in creating bilingual content that positions them as cultural ambassadors, similar to how Chinese users naturally assume expert roles when explaining cultural elements to TikTok refugees. Such projects would enhance learners' language skills and their confidence as intercultural communicators.

7 Conclusion

This study represents one of the first empirical investigations into how the unprecedented digital migration of "TikTok refugees" to Xiaohongshu creates new affordances for informal English learning among Chinese users. By examining this spontaneous intercultural digital phenomenon, our research has elaborated on how unexpected platform migration can transform a domestic social media space into a vibrant environment for authentic language learning and intercultural exchange.

While our findings offer valuable insights into the language learning opportunities created by digital migration, several limitations should be noted. For example, our analysis focuses primarily on the affordances emerging from user migration rather than examining Xiaohongshu's technological architecture and features. Additionally, though our analysis of public social media data provides rich observational insights, direct user perspectives through questionnaires and interviews would enhance understanding of how learners perceive and utilize these digital affordances. Also noted is that the scope of our research primarily captures Chinese EFL learners' experiences, yet the bilateral nature of language exchange on Xiaohongshu suggests broader research possibilities. Examining this phenomenon through the lens of translanguaging (Li, 2018) could reveal how "TikTok refugees" develop flexible bilingual practices and negotiate meaning across languages. Furthermore, an investigation of the platform's algorithmic features and content recommendation systems might illuminate different mechanisms supporting Chinese versus English language learning (Darvin & Hafner, 2022; Liu, 2023a). We hope this study will motivate future research examining how digital migration and cross-platform user movement reshape opportunities for informal language learning and intercultural communication in an increasingly connected digital world.

Notes

1. All metrics were recorded on January 19, 2025; B = Billion; M = Million.
2. English Corner (英语角) is a widespread social practice in China where language learners gather regularly in physical or virtual spaces to practice English through informal conversations, a tradition that Chinese users are now recreating within Xiaohongshu's digital environment.

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