Review of International Relations
(Jurnal Kajian Ilmu Hubungan Internasional)
Volume 8 Issue 1 (2026), pp. 113-146
doi: 10.24252/rir.v8i1.67773



NON-STATE ACTORS IN THE PLATFORM ERA: THE CASE OF CHINESE MICRO-DRAMA PRODUCERS

Ayu Kartika Julianingsih Tas'an[1*], Riska Luneto[2]
Universitas Bosowa[1]
Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar[2]

Abstract

This article examines how commercially driven non-state actors achieve transnational reach in the digital era, using Chinese micro-drama producers as an illustrative case. Chinese micro-dramas are short-form serialised video content, typically lasting one to three minutes per episode, that have achieved rapid international distribution through digital platforms since the early 2020s. To analyse this phenomenon, the authors draw on two complementary theoretical frameworks: Keohane and Nye's (1972) transnational relations framework, which establishes the analytical relevance of non-state actors operating independently of state foreign policy organs, and Bjola and Kornprobst's (2023) Digital International Relations framework, which explains how digitalization redistributes agency toward actors previously excluded from cross-border participation. This article employs a qualitative single case study design, relying on document analysis of secondary sources including industry reports, company disclosures, and media coverage. The findings demonstrate three things: first, Chinese micro-drama producers are genuinely non-state commercial actors which privately owned, commercially funded, profit-motivated, and operating independently of China's official cultural diplomacy apparatus. Second, these actors achieved substantial transnational reach across multiple global regions, with leading platforms accumulating millions of monthly active users and generating revenue that surpassed China's entire domestic box office for the first time. Third, digital platforms enabled this reach by reducing three barriers that had previously confined cross-border operations to states and large corporations: distribution barriers, discovery barriers, and monetization barriers.

Keywords: *non-state actors, digital platforms, Chinese micro-drama, transnational reach, digital international relations*

*Corresponding Author: Ayu Kartika Julianingsih Ta'an, Universitas Bosowa, Indonesia

P-ISSN: 2685-5879; E-ISSN: 2685-421X
Submitted: 1 January 2025; Revised Version: 10 January 2025; Accepted: 15 January 2025;
Published: 20 January 2025

Abstrak

Artikel ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji bagaimana aktor non-negara yang berbasis komersial mampu membangun jangkauan transnasional di era digital, dengan menjadikan produser mikro-drama Tiongkok sebagai kasus ilustratif. Mikro-drama Tiongkok merupakan konten video berseri berformat pendek yang umumnya berdurasi satu hingga tiga menit per episode, dan telah menyebar ke pasar internasional secara pesat melalui platform digital sejak awal 2020-an. Untuk menganalisis fenomena ini, penulis menggunakan dua kerangka teoretis yang saling melengkapi: kerangka hubungan transnasional Keohane dan Nye (1972), yang menegaskan relevansi analitis aktor non-negara yang beroperasi secara independen dari kebijakan luar negeri negara, dan kerangka Hubungan Internasional Digital Bjola dan Kornprobst (2023), yang menjelaskan bagaimana digitalisasi mendistribusikan ulang keagenan kepada aktor-aktor yang sebelumnya tidak memiliki akses terhadap partisipasi lintas batas. Artikel ini menggunakan desain studi kasus kualitatif tunggal dengan mengandalkan analisis dokumen dari sumber-sumber sekunder, termasuk laporan industri, data perusahaan, dan liputan media. Temuan artikel ini menunjukkan tiga hal. Pertama, produser mikro-drama Tiongkok terbukti merupakan aktor komersial non-negara, didanai oleh modal komersial, berorientasi pada keuntungan, dan beroperasi secara independen dari strategi diplomasi budaya resmi Tiongkok. Kedua, para aktor ini berhasil membangun jangkauan transnasional yang signifikan di berbagai kawasan dunia, dengan berbagai platform populer yang berhasil meraih jutaan pengguna aktif bulanan dan mencatat pendapatan yang untuk pertama kalinya melampaui total pendapatan box office domestik Tiongkok. Ketiga, platform digital memungkinkan jangkauan tersebut dengan mengurangi tiga hambatan yang sebelumnya membatasi operasi lintas batas pada negara dan korporasi besar, yaitu hambatan distribusi, hambatan penemuan konten, dan hambatan monetisasi

***Kata Kunci**: aktor non-negara, platform digital, mikro-drama Tiongkok, jangkauan transnasional, hubungan internasional digital*

Introduction

The expansion of digital platforms has changed the conduct of international affairs by enabling non-state actors to engage in cross-border interaction. International affairs in the global system are no longer exercised only through official channels such as official state media or diplomatic activities, but also through non-formal activities such as decentralised forms of digital circulation. These activities are mainly driven by private

actors such as multinational corporations, transnational advocacy networks, and global media organizations (Hwang, 2025). These transformations have compelled scholars of International Relations to reassess how transnational relations are produced, exercised, and observed within a digitally mediated global system.

In the context of digitalization, non-state actors have an increasingly consequential role in shaping the dynamics of international affairs through their activities in the digital sphere. Digital platforms in particular have served as enabling infrastructure, allowing non-state actors in various size and resources to engage transnationally in ways that bypass traditional state-controlled. The emergence of digital era which mediated forms of cross-border participation has therefore prompted scholars of international relations to reconsider longstanding assumptions about which actors matter, under what conditions they can operate transnationally, and what role digitalization plays in shaping these dynamics.

Among the non-state actors that have gained growing relevance in international relations scholarship, media industries hold a strategic position. Unlike advocacy networks or multinational corporations whose transnational significance has long been studies, media industries operate as economic actors, cultural intermediaries, and infrastructures of transnational circulation. This triple function gives media industries a distinctive analytical relevance in IR: their cross-border activities are not only economically significant but also carry implications for how cultures, ideas, and narratives are distributed across national boundaries. It is within this context that Chinese short-form serialized dramas, commonly referred to as micro-dramas, emerge as a particular case. The micro drama shows how commercially driven media products can achieve notable cross-border visibility through platform-based distribution. Characterized by short episode duration (1-3

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minutes), vertical framing, engaging yet formulaic plots, and cliffhanger structures, micro-dramas have achieved a breakthrough in the digital world beyond Southeast Asia into Europe and North America, emphasizes its emerging position (Tang & Wang, 2025).

From an International Relations perspective, the significance of this phenomenon lies both in its economic scale as well as in the nature of the actors driving its international expansion. The major internationally operating platforms, including ReelShort and DramaBox, are relatively young private firms that entered international markets without diplomatic backing, official state promotion, or pre-existing global distribution networks (Variety, 2025). These actors have achieved substantial cross-border operations across countries, engaging millions of international viewers and generating significant cross-border revenue streams.

This study addresses the following research question: How do commercially driven non-state actors achieve transnational reach through digital platform infrastructure? This study examines how non-state actors attain transnational reach in the digital era, using Chinese micro-drama producers as a critical case as they involve relatively young commercial actors achieving unusually rapid transnational expansion. Rather than engaging in content analysis or examining representation in the content, the study documents patterns of transnational expansion, establishes the commercial non-state status of these actors, and analyses how platform-based digital infrastructures facilitate cross-border activities.

The study makes two key contributions. Empirically, it documents how private commercial entities have achieved substantial cross-border operational capacity through digital platforms, using Chinese micro-dramas as a case. Theoretically, it contributes to transnational relations theory by using two frameworks. First, it draws on Keohane and Nye's (1972)

transnational relations framework to establish that commercially driven non-state actors could conduct cross-border activities independently of state foreign policy organs are analytically meaningful subjects for IR analysis. Second, it builds on Bjola and Kornprobst's (2023) Digital International Relations framework to explain how digitalization has restructured the conditions of transnational participation, redistributing agency toward actors that previously lacked the resources and infrastructure for cross-border reach. These two frameworks allow this study to document not only that micro-drama producers are non-state transnational actors, but also why digitalization specifically enabled their transnational reach.

Analytical Framework

Transnational Relations Theory

International Relations has recognized that states are not the only primary actors in world politics. Keohane and Nye's (1972) had fundamentally challenged state-centric view by demonstrating that non-state actors, such as corporations, advocacy groups, social movements, epistemic communities, conduct activities across borders that shape international outcomes. They defined transnational relations as "contacts, coalitions, and interactions across state boundaries that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of governments" (Keohane & Nye, 1972, p. xii).

This framework established three key insights that remain foundational to IR framework. First, non-state actors operate autonomously across borders, pursuing their own objectives rather than serving as instruments of state policy. Second, transnational interactions affect international relations by creating interdependencies, spreading ideas and practices, also shaping political and economic outcomes. Third, transnational relations are not simply interstate relations but constitute a distinct level of analysis. Risse-Kappen (1995)

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brought transnational actors "back in" to IR theory, emphasizing how non-state networks influence international cooperation and domestic politics. Keck and Sikkink (1998) also demonstrated how transnational advocacy networks mobilize information and norms to effect political change. Slaughter (2004) examined how transnational networks of government officials shape global governance. These contributions solidified the recognition that understanding international relations requires accounting for non-state transnational actors.

However, transnational relations theory developed in a pre-digital era. When Keohane and Nye wrote in 1972, transnational operations encountered high barriers: international communication which required financial ability, distribution networks were limited to physical channels, marketing required significant capital, and reaching foreign audiences typically necessitated partnerships with local intermediaries or state-controlled broadcasters. Even Risse-Kappen's (1995) still argue that effective transnational operation required either substantial organizational resources (large NGOs, multinational corporations) or strategic access to policy networks. It shows that existing transnational relations theory does not adequately account for how digital infrastructure has changed the condition of transnational activities. Some of the fundamental changes are lowered barriers to transnational operation, potentially enabling a broader range of actors, including young corporation, to achieve cross-border reach that was previously inaccessible to them.

Bjola and Kornprobst (2023) offer the most systematic attempt to address this gap in Digital International Relations. They argue that the digital revolution changes three barriers of international interaction: the technological conditions under which actors operate, the distribution of agency among actors, and the ordering principles that govern participation in international affairs. While all three dimensions are relevant to

understanding digitalization's broader impact on world politics, this study draws specifically on their concept of agency redistribution where digitalization restructures the conditions of transnational participation in ways that enable actors previously excluded from cross-border operations to achieve meaningful international presence. This concept of agency redistribution is directly relevant to the micro-drama case: it provides the theoretical basis for explaining why actors that Keohane and Nye's framework could not have anticipated, commercially driven firms without international infrastructure, are now capable of achieving substantial transnational reach.

Both transnational relations theory and digital international relations framework are particularly relevant to this study. Transnational theory provides the foundational understanding for identifying actors that operate across borders independently of state foreign policy organs. Without this framework, the cross-border activities of commercially driven media-firms risk being understood only as economic phenomena rather than as analytically meaningful subjects for IR studies. At the same time, Bjola and Kornprobst's argument would use to explain why digitalization has changed the conditions that determine which actors can achieve such reach. Together, these frameworks allow this study not only to document that micro-drama producers are non-state transnational actors, but also to explain why digitalization specifically enabled their transnational expansion in ways that earlier theory could not have anticipated.

Non-State Actors in International Relations: Defining Independence

As this study emphasizes non-state actors as the central research object, it is essential to clearly distinguish non-state actors from state actors. Non-state actors are defined as "groups or individuals who are wholly or partly autonomous from central

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government control and who may pursue goals that run counter to official state policies" (Risse, 2002, p. 255). This shows that diverse entities including multinational corporations, non-governmental organizations, advocacy networks, and commercial entities, united by their capacity to operate across borders independently of state foreign policy organs (Josselin & Wallace, 2001). However, defining Chinese commercial corporations as "non-state actors" requires careful consideration due to China's political economy. Unlike liberal market economies where a clear public-private distinction exists, China operates under what scholars call "state capitalism" (Naughton, 2018), a system where the state maintains significant influence over economic activity even when formal ownership is private.

Hence, this study does not claim that Chinese micro-drama producers operate in complete separation from the state, as all entertainment productions from China are regulated under national policy frameworks established by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) (Reuters, 2024). All Chinese companies operate within a regulatory framework that includes content censorship, licensing requirements, and industrial policy. The relevant question is not whether these actors have any relationship with the state, but whether they operate as commercial entities pursuing profit rather than as instruments of China's cultural policy.

To position non-state actors in the context of Chinese micro-drama producers, this study employs the operational criteria framework developed in transnational relations studies (Cutler, Haufler, & Porter, 1999; Risse, 2002), which argues that independence has several facets:

a. Ownership and funding: Non-state actors are not owned by states and do not receive primary funding from government budgets. They may be privately owned, publicly traded, or organized as non-profits, but they are not state-owned enterprises (Cutler et al., 1999).

b. Decision-making autonomy: Non-state actors make strategic and operational decisions based on their own organizational objectives (profit, advocacy goals, social missions) rather than implementing state directives or foreign policy objectives (Risse, 2002).
c. Motivation: Non-state actors are motivated by organizational goals, for example: commercial success, advocacy objectives, social change, rather than serving as instruments of state policy (Keohane & Nye, 1972).
d. Regulatory context vs. state direction: It is important to distinguish between operating within state regulatory frameworks (which all actors must do) and operating at the direction of states. Non-state actors comply with regulations but are not directed by states in their transnational operations (Willetts, 2011).

This definition does not require that actors have no relationship with states. States may regulate non-state actors, provide infrastructure, or create favorable policy environments. The key question is whether actors operate autonomously, making independent decisions about whether, where, and how to operate transnationally, rather than serving as state agents or policy instruments (Risse-Kappen, 1995). For this research, demonstrating non-state status requires showing that Chinese micro-drama producers: (1) are privately owned and commercially funded, (2) make independent business decisions, (3) are motivated by commercial profit rather than state cultural policy objectives, and (4) operate independently of China's official cultural diplomacy programs.

Digital Platform as Transnational Spaces

While this study focuses on non-state actors rather than platforms themselves, it is also a necessity to look at the digital platforms provide infrastructure that has lowered barriers to

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transnational operation. Before the digitalization era, there were some barriers in transnational reach, such as distribution barriers where reaching audiences in other countries required physical distribution networks (shipping products, establishing offices) or access to state-controlled broadcasting channels (Flew & Waisbord, 2015). Lobato (2019) also argue that international audiences needed to learn about offerings through expensive marketing campaigns or partnerships with local intermediaries. It shows that traditional barriers make transnational reach cost a lot of capitals and time-consuming (Straubhaar, 2007).

The rise of digital platforms has intensified the role of non-state actors in international influence by providing infrastructures for rapid and large-scale cross-border circulation. Unlike traditional media systems, digital platforms are characterized by algorithmic distribution, user engagement metrics, and decentralized content production (Van Dijck, Poell, & De Waal, 2018). These features enable patterns of visibility to emerge through repetition, popularity, and platform dynamics rather than through centralized editorial control (Gillespie, 2018). As Tas'an (2022) demonstrates, digitalization opens a greater opportunity for the consumer to be an independent content creator and fundamentally changes the distribution pattern in media industries where it heavily relies on online platforms. This decentralizing effect of digitalization represents a structural shift in how cultural content can circulate transnationally, moving from centralized distribution systems to platform-mediated infrastructures which are accessible to smaller actors.

Digital platforms have reduced or eliminated many of these traditional barriers. Those platforms operate transnationally by default. Content uploaded to YouTube, TikTok, or dedicated streaming platforms becomes instantly accessible globally without requiring the producer to establish distribution in each country (Lobato, 2019). As Cunningham and

Craig (2019) observe, "social media entertainment has globalized more rapidly than any previous form of media" (p. 5), enabled by platforms' inherently transnational architecture. As platforms are operated in multiple countries, it facilitates subtitle integration and some provide translation tools, lowering barriers to cross-language reach (Dwyer, 2017). While full localization remains complex, basic subtitle functionality enables content to cross linguistic boundaries more easily than traditional media required (Lobato, 2019). It is easily found particularly in streaming services like Netflix, Prime, and other similar platforms.

In the context of digital platform, algorithm play significant role. Platform recommendation algorithms connect content with potentially interested audiences worldwide, reducing or eliminating the need for expensive international marketing campaigns (Airoldi, Beraldo, & Gandini, 2016). Not to mention the built-in payment systems within app stores and platforms enable cross-border revenue generation without requiring local financial infrastructure. It shows that the digitalization has built an infrastructure that enable non-state actors play a pivotal role and able to take advantages.

This infrastructural shift means that transnational reach is now accessible to actors who previously could not achieve it. Small commercial entities can distribute globally, reach international audiences, and generate cross-border revenue without state backing or massive capital investment. As Plantin et.al (2018) argue, when digital services build their own infrstructure, they fundamentally reshape the conditions for transnational operation (p. 298). These three barriers distribution, discovery, and monetization represent precisely the structural conditions that Bjola and Kornprobst (2023) identify as being reshaped by digitalization, enabling a redistribution of agency toward commercially driven actors that

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previously lacked the resources to participate in transnational operations.

Conceptualizing Transnational Reach

This study focuses on transnational reach rather than "influence" because reach is directly observable through operational indicators, where actors operate, how long they maintain presence, what engagement they generate, while influence requires demonstrating causal effects on behaviors or outcomes, an empirical challenge beyond this study's scope. Theoretically, this recognizes that presence itself matters: transnational actors are significant through their participation in constituting transnational spaces, independent of demonstrating specific causal impacts (Risse-Kappen, 1995). To analyze how non-state actors operate across borders in the digital era, this study employs the concept of transnational reach.

Drawing on transnational relations framework, transnational reach refers to the capacity of an actor to operate across multiple countries with sustained presence and engagement (Risse-Kappen, 1995). "Transnational" denotes in a simplifying manner an organization working beyond state boundaries and acting independently from traditional state authorities (Willetts, 2010). As Nye and Keohane circumscribed transnational relations as "contacts, coalitions, and interactions across state boundaries that are not controlled by the central foreign policy organs of government (Nye & Keohane, 1971, p. 331), this study conceptualizes transnational reach as the observable capacity to sustain such cross-border operations in digital spaces.

Three dimensions are used to measure transnational reach in digital spaces. The first dimension is geographic scope, informed by Willetts (2011), who notes that transnational activities have become more complex and spread over wider geographical areas. The second is operational sustainability,

informed by Risse's (2002) argument that transnational actors must demonstrate tangible ongoing cross-border activities to be analytically meaningful. The third is engagement indicators, drawing on broader transnational relations framework's emphasis on observable cross-border operations as evidence of actor presence (Keohane & Nye, 1972; Risse-Kappen, 1995). Together, these three dimensions provide an operational framework for assessing whether and to what extent an actor has achieved transnational reach in the digital spaces.

Method

This study employs a qualitative single case study design (Yin, 2018) to examine how non-state actors achieve transnational reach in the digital era. The case study approach is appropriate when investigating contemporary phenomena within real-world contexts, particularly when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). Chinese micro-drama producers represent a contemporary case of non-state transnational reach that has emerged only in the past five years, making case study methodology well-suited for exploratory analysis.

The research design is exploratory and descriptive rather than hypothesis-testing. Given the novelty of the phenomenon, this study aims to document and describe the case systematically, identify key patterns, and generate propositions for future research. The study adopts a descriptive case study, focusing on what can be observed and documented through public sources rather than attempting to make claims about internal motivations or strategies that would require interview access or confidential data.

Chinese Micro-dramas that were produced and circulated during 2020 – 2025 becomes the case for this research. As single case studies limit generalizability, findings from Chinese micro-dramas may not apply to other sectors, countries,

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or types of content. However, it is appropriate for exploratory research on recent phenomena and for theory-building rather than theory-testing (Eisenhardt, 1989). Also, all data in this research are generated from secondary data, such as, industry reports and market data, media coverage, film companies, and recent academic literature related to the topic. Hence, the data analysis in this study follows a document analysis approach (Bowen, 2009), in which publicly available secondary sources based on relevance to the research question and cross-referenced where possible to strengthen reliability.

A methodological note on data quality is warranted. The empirical findings in this study rely substantially on commercial analytics firms including Sensor Tower, Appfigures, and Antom Knowledge, as well as company self-reported figures from platforms such as DramaBox and ReelShort. These sources represent the best publicly available data for an industry that does not yet have comprehensive academic coverage, and their findings are broadly consistent across multiple independent sources, which strengthens their reliability. However, their methodological procedures are not fully transparent and their commercial interests may shape how data is presented and framed. Download figures from app analytics firms are estimates based on panel data rather than exact counts, and company self-reported user figures such as registered users and monthly active users are not independently verified. Where possible, this study corroborates claims across multiple sources rather than relying on any single data point.

Discussions

Non-State Actors in the Digital Era: What the Micro-Drama Case Shows

This section establishes that Chinese micro-drama producers qualify as non-state actors by applying the operational criteria framework developed in transnational relations studies (Cutler,

Haufler, & Porter, 1999; Risse, 2002), which identifies four key facets of independence: ownership and funding, decision-making autonomy, motivation, and the distinction between regulatory compliance and state direction.

a. Ownership and Funding

Chinese micro-drama platforms and producers are privately owned commercial companies rather than state-owned enterprises. ReelShort is owned by Crazy Maple Studio, a California-based company connected to China's COL Group, a private media company founded by entrepreneur Lin Qi in 2008 (Tang & Wang, 2025). COL Group operates as a commercial entertainment company with investment from Tencent, a publicly listed technology company rather than a state-owned enterprise. Although Tencent has a complex relationship with the Chinese government, the internationally operating segment of the micro-drama industry is driven primarily by privately owned firms (International Trade Administration, 2025). DramaBox is headed by Singapore-based Storymatrix Pte. Ltd, with content produced by China's Dian Zhong Technology, also a private company (Tang & Wang, 2025). The sector also includes smaller private studios, such as Liu Yi Media, founded in 2022 by author Mo Jian (China Daily, 2024).

In terms of funding, industry revenue reached 50.44 billion yuan (approximately $6.91 billion) in 2024, surpassing China's entire domestic box office for that year (Tang & Wang, 2025). This revenue came from advertising and direct viewer spending through in-app purchases and subscriptions, representing commercial income entirely independent of government budgets (Reuters, 2024). These facts confirm that Chinese micro-drama producers meet the first criterion: they are privately owned and commercially

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funded rather than state-owned or state-financed (Cutler et al., 1999).

b. Decision-Making Autonomy

Chinese micro-drama producers make strategic decisions based on their own commercial goals rather than state directives or foreign policy objectives. Both ReelShort and DramaBox entered international markets as relatively young private firms without established global distribution networks, marketing infrastructure, or diplomatic support. Their decisions about content, platform strategy, and geographic expansion were guided by market opportunities rather than government instructions. The clearest indicator of this autonomy is the reasoning behind their international expansion. The rapid growth of short drama companies in China led to a saturated domestic market and tighter regulations, which pushed companies to seek new audiences abroad (Baiguan News, 2024). These companies built their own applications, developed content strategies for international audiences, and expanded overseas without guidance from state agencies. This pattern of independent decision-making is consistent with Risse's (2002) criterion that non-state actors pursue their own organizational goals rather than serving as instruments of state policy.

c. Motivation

The motivation driving Chinese micro-drama producers is entirely commercial rather than political. Their cross-border operations are aimed at generating profit through advertising revenue, in-app purchases, and subscriptions not at advancing China's cultural diplomacy or foreign policy. This is most clearly seen in the decision to expand internationally. Facing a crowded domestic market and growing regulatory pressure, companies sought new revenue opportunities abroad by replicating their existing business model in new markets (Baiguan News, 2024). This

commercial logic is further confirmed by the industry's funding structure where investment comes from private sources including film companies, celebrity studios, and commercial brands rather than from government budgets (Reuters, 2024). Users pay to access content either through direct payment or by watching advertisements, creating revenue streams that are structurally independent of any state cultural policy objective. This profit-driven motivation clearly distinguishes micro-drama producers from state-directed cultural actors and confirms their status as commercially independent non-state actors (Keohane & Nye, 1972).

d. Regulatory Context vs. State Direction

The final criterion requires a clear distinction between operating within a state regulatory framework which all actors must do and being directed by the state in transnational activities. Chinese micro-drama producers operate within China's regulatory framework, including content licensing requirements set by the National Radio and Television Administration (NRTA) (Reuters, 2024). However, regulatory compliance does not equal state direction. The key question is whether these actors are instructed by the state in their international operations, and the available evidence consistently suggests they are not.

China has pursued an official cultural Going Out strategy since 2011, which includes support for overseas offices of major media organizations, the establishment of Chinese Culture Centres and Confucius Institutes, and training programs for export-oriented cultural companies (Ye & Albornoz, 2018). Chinese micro-drama producers do not appear in any of these official programs. There is no documented evidence that diplomatic channels facilitated their international distribution, that state subsidies supported their overseas marketing, or that foreign policy coordination shaped their geographic

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expansion. As a major cultural power, China's mainstream film and drama sector is dominated by state-owned entities such as China Film Group Corporation (Frater, 2014) and state broadcasters such as China Central Television (CCTV), which produce and distribute content as part of official cultural policy (Zhu, 2019). Micro-drama producers occupy a clearly different position where they comply with domestic regulations but operate internationally according to commercial logic rather than state direction, which is consistent with Willetts' (2011) understanding of non-state actor independence.

Based on this finding, the case of Chinese micro-drama producers confirms Keohane and Nye's (1972) argument that non-state actors can conduct meaningful cross-border activities independently of state foreign policy organs. Across all four criteria, Chinese micro-drama producers demonstrate the characteristics of independent commercial actors. Their international expansion was driven by market opportunity rather than state direction, which supports the transnational relations framework and extends it into a context that earlier scholars did not anticipate: relatively young commercial media producers achieving substantial transnational reach through digital infrastructure.

However, the case also reveals a limitation in how available framework understands non-state actors. Keohane and Nye (1972) and Risse-Kappen (1995) primarily had in mind well-resourced organizations, such as large corporations, advocacy networks, and professional bodies with sufficient capacity to sustain international activities. The micro-drama case shows that this condition has changed. ReelShort launched in August 2022 and DramaBox entered international markets in April 2023, both relatively young compared to established multinational media companies, yet both achieved documented presence across dozens of countries within months. This suggests that the conditions for achieving transnational reach

have changed structurally because of digital infrastructure, rather than gradually through organizational growth.

The micro-drama case also highlights a dimension of transnational relations that existing theory has not fully addressed: commercially driven actors whose cross-border operations are motivated by profit rather than political or normative goals. While transnational relations theory has recognized commercial actors such as multinational corporations, it has largely focused on their political implications rather than on their role in commercial and cultural circulation. This suggests that micro-drama producers represent a new kind of actor that older frameworks were not designed to explain.

This case also contributes to the emerging Digital International Relations studies. Bjola and Kornprobst (2023) argue that digitalization redistributes agency in international politics, enabling new actors to participate in ways that established frameworks did not anticipate. The micro-drama case provides direct empirical support for this claim. Chinese micro-drama producers are precisely the type of actor whose transnational participation was structurally impossible before digital infrastructure lowered the barriers to cross-border operation. Their documented presence across multiple global regions, achieved without diplomatic support or large corporate infrastructure, illustrates how agency redistribution operates in practice not as a gradual organizational growth process, but as a rapid structural shift enabled by platform infrastructure. This empirical documentation of agency redistribution in a commercially driven, non-political context adds a dimension to Bjola and Kornprobst's framework that their primarily theoretical work does not fully develop.

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Digitalization and the Lowering of Transnational Barriers

Understanding how digitalization lowered transnational barriers is central to this study's argument because it directly explains the mechanism through which Chinese micro-drama producers, actors without pre-existing international infrastructure were able to achieve cross-border reach that earlier theory reserved for states and large corporations. Without considering this infrastructural shift, the transnational expansion of micro-drama producers it would be unclear why actors of this kind were able to achieve transnational reach. The transnational reach of Chinese micro-dramas is assessed here across three dimensions: geographic scope, operational sustainability, and engagement indicators.

The popularity of Chinese micro-drama come from the strategy to be in digital platform rather than in conventional media such as TV. In terms of geographic scope, Chinese micro-drama platforms have achieved documented presence across all major global regions within a short timeframe. In North America, ReelShort as the leading micro-drama platform, has achieved notable penetration in the United States market. In November 2023, ReelShort spent several days ranked as the No. 2 app overall in the U.S. App Store and reached No. 1 in the Entertainment category for approximately four days (Perez, 2023). As of December 2024, ReelShort ranked 26th on the U.S. App Store's Top Grossing chart overall, with its nearest competitor DramaBox ranked 60th (AppFigures, 2024). The platform's success in the U.S. market is particularly notable given the competitive entertainment landscape and represents a non-Western cultural product achieving commercial success in a Western market.

In Southeast Asia, the micro-dramas have strong presence across Southeast Asian markets including Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Malaysia through advertisement in Instagram who leads the consumer to the

certain app (IMBD, 2025). This represents logical geographic expansion given cultural proximity and existing flows of Chinese media content to the region. While precise country-by-country data is not publicly available, the evidence indicates micro-drama presence in other regions like Latin America. Since 2024, short drama platforms entered a period of rapid growth, with cumulative downloads in Q1 2025 accounting for 27% of the global total, making the region the largest global market by download volume (Antom Knowledge, 2026), while Brazil and Mexico together account for more than 75% of total short drama downloads in the region (Antom Knowledge, 2026).

Beyond dedicated apps like ReelShort and DramaBox, micro-dramas also circulate through TikTok, YouTube, and various regional streaming services, creating multiple distribution channels across borders. A survey of over 100,000 consumers across 30 global markets found that 12% of internet users have consumed a micro-drama on social media, with YouTube and TikTok together accounting for 82% of social media micro-drama viewership (Ampere Analysis, 2025). As a result, micro-drama platforms have expanded into European markets including the United Kingdom, France, and Germany. Industry data confirms that while the U.S., Japan, and Southeast Asia lead in revenue, Europe is categorized alongside Latin America as a region of continued growth and increasing adoption of micro-drama (Digiday, 2025).

In terms of operational sustainability, the transnational presence of Chinese micro-drama producers reflects a sustained and expanding pattern rather than a one-time viral event. DramaBox retained 17% of users at month six and fifteen percent at month twelve in 2024, outperforming competitors in long-term engagement metrics (Sensor Tower, 2025), indicating habitual consumption rather than episodic curiosity. Content production volume also sustains ongoing international presence with more than 30,000 micro-drama titles were released in 2024

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alone (China.org.cn, 2025), providing a continuous pipeline that supports platform retention across markets. This sustained content production distinguishes the industry from cases of temporary viral success and supports the claim of durable transnational operational capacity.

Along with its popularity, the Chinese micro-drama presents a rapid growth pattern which suggests both strong demand and effective transnational distribution. Within two years of its launch in August 2022, ReelShort accumulated 78.6 million downloads and 50 million monthly active users globally (INSEAD Publishing, 2024), while as of December 2024, DramaBox, had accumulated 90 million registered users and 30 million monthly active users, expanding to over 200 countries and regions with more than 2,000 drama series available (DramaBox, 2024). Not to mention a high completion rates and binge-watching behavior reported in Chinese micro-drama (South China Morning Post, 2025). Across the top five micro-drama apps combined, monthly active users grew 5,848 percent year-over-year between end-2023 and end-2024 (Omdia, as cited in Deadline, 2025).

Engagement data also confirms intensive viewing behavior. In Q4 2025, ReelShort users average 35.7 minutes of daily use per active user, surpassing Netflix at 24.8 minutes, Prime Video at 26.9 minutes, and Disney+ at 23 minutes on mobile (Omdia, 2026). This high engagement is structurally driven by the format's cliffhanger architecture, which produces sequential episode consumption. This rapid expansion across four years contrasts sharply with traditional media exports, which typically required decades to build international distribution. The speed itself demonstrates how digital infrastructure enables rapid transnational reach for non-state actors.

The engagement data is further supported by evidence of direct cross-border revenue generation. International in-app

purchase revenue grew from approximately $178 million in the first quarter of 2024 to approximately $700 million in the first quarter of 2025 (Sensor Tower, 2025) demonstrates that micro-drama producers successfully collected revenue from international audiences through built-in payment systems within app stores and streaming platforms without establishing local financial infrastructure in each market. This confirms that monetization barriers, which previously required local financial arrangements to generate revenue from foreign audiences, were effectively overcome through digital platform infrastructure.

Based on those findings, digital platform infrastructure enabled Chinese micro-drama producers to achieve transnational reach by reducing three types of barriers that previously limited cross-border operations to states and large corporations which are distribution barriers, discovery, and monetization barriers. This finding has also a direct implication for how IR studies understand the role of infrastructure in transnational operations. Traditional IR frameworks focused on state-provided infrastructure such as diplomatic channels and international institutions, and corporate infrastructure such as multinational distribution networks. Both types imposed high entry requirements that filtered which type of actors could operate transnationally. Digital platforms represent a different infrastructure type that is accessible to small actors who meet basic technical and content requirements. While platforms do create new forms of gatekeeping through content policies and algorithmic logic (Van Dijck et al., 2018), these requirements are significantly less demanding than those of traditional transnational infrastructure. The micro-drama case demonstrates this concretely: private firms founded only a few years ago were able to access global audiences without meeting any of the traditional prerequisites for transnational operation.

Taken together, digitalization has not merely provided existing transnational actors with new tools, but, it has

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structurally changed the conditions under which transnational participation is possible. The micro-drama case shows that privately owned commercial firms, without diplomatic backing, established distribution networks, or large capital investment, can now achieve and sustain meaningful cross-border presence through digital platform infrastructure alone. This represents a concrete illustration of the agency redistribution that Bjola and Kornprobst (2023) theorize at an abstract level, and extends Keohane and Nye's (1972) transnational relations framework into a broader discussion to commercially driven, digitally enabled, non-political actors that earlier theory did not anticipate. The analytical implication is understanding contemporary transnational relations requires accounting for a broader and more diverse range of actors than existing frameworks were designed to accommodate.

In the other hand, it is worth acknowledging that some alternative explanations cannot be fully ruled out from the available data. First, micro-drama success in Western markets may partly reflect diaspora Chinese audiences rather than genuinely new cross-cultural viewership, meaning the transnational reach documented here may not be entirely cross-cultural in nature. Second, the rapid growth pattern may reflect a temporary post-pandemic shift in digital consumption behavior rather than a durable structural change enabled by digital platforms. Third, international reach may have been achieved primarily through heavy paid advertising investment rather than organic algorithmic discovery, which would qualify the claim that digital platforms have lowered discovery barriers. These alternative explanations do not invalidate the core findings but indicate that the mechanisms behind micro-drama transnational reach are likely more complex than any single explanation captures. Future research with access to proprietary platform and audience data would be better positioned to disentangle these factors.

Transnational Presence as Sustained Operation

Risse-Kappen (1995) argues, transnational actors become analytically significant through their ongoing cross-border activities rather than through isolated interactions. Here the operational sustainability matters politically since it increases the likelihood of generating consequential effects on audiences, markets, and cultural flows in ways that momentary visibility cannot (Lobato, 2019). When a non-state actor maintains consistent cross-border presence over multiple years, it moves from being an incidental participant in transnational relations to becoming a structural feature of them, shaping how audiences consume content, how platforms allocate algorithmic attention, and how cultural products circulate across national boundaries.

The findings also support a practical clarification about what constitutes meaningful transnational presence. The micro-drama case is not analytically considerable because of any single data point a viral moment, a download spike, or a high revenue figure in one quarter. It is important because of sustained, expanding, multi-dimensional presence over multiple years across multiple regions. Revenue grew consistently from 2021 to 2024. User bases expanded and demonstrated retention rather than one-time downloads. Content production continued at scale. This pattern distinguishes consequential transnational reach from incidental cross-border circulation.

This observation is relevant for IR as digital platforms increasingly enable brief cross-border visibility for a wide range of products and content. Not every viral app or trending video constitutes a meaningful non-state transnational actor in the IR sense. The micro-drama case suggests that ongoing and consistent presence rather than temporary visibility is the most useful criterion for determining which digitally driven actors deserve serious attention in IR scholarship as meaningful participants in transnational relations, given their capacity to produce lasting cross-border interactions rather than short-term

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digital exposure. Geographic scope, revenue, and user numbers matter, but their analytical significance is strongest when combined with evidence of sustained operation over time.

Conclusion

Chinese micro-drama producers, have achieved transnational reach through digital platform infrastructure, demonstrating that the digital era has expanded and it changed the condition where actors can participate in transnational relations beyond what earlier theory anticipated. First, micro-drama producers are genuinely non-state commercial actors, privately owned, commercially funded, profit-motivated, market-responsive, and absent from China's official cultural diplomacy apparatus. While operating within regulatory frameworks, their transnational expansion was driven by commercial opportunity rather than state strategy.

Second, these actors achieved substantial transnational reach operating across countries in some regions with sustained presence, generating billions in revenue with substantial international components, engaging millions of international users, and producing thousands of titles continuously. Third, digital platforms enabled this reach by lowering traditional barriers: providing global distribution infrastructure, algorithm-driven discovery, built-in monetization, low entry costs, and minimal localization requirements.

These findings contribute to transnational relations theory in two ways. Empirically, the study documents how privately owned commercial firms without pre-existing international infrastructure, can achieve substantial cross-border operational capacity through digital platforms, providing a case that earlier transnational relations theory did not anticipate. Theoretically, the study demonstrates that digitalization has changed the conditions for transnational reach, lowering the resource threshold sufficiently for a new

category of actor privately owned commercial firms that were previously confined to domestic markets without the infrastructure for international reach. IR studies need to account for this expanded universe of transnational actors and to develop tools for assessing their analytical significance.

The study also highlights platform infrastructure as a relevant IR variable. Platforms provide alternative pathways to transnational reach that bypass traditional state or corporate channels, operating as private infrastructure with global reach that shapes transnational interactions according to commercial rather than diplomatic logic.

This research has several limitations that should be acknowledged clearly. First, the single case study design limits generalisability. The patterns documented here, a Chinese-owned platform operating in the entertainment sector during a period of rapid digital growth, may not apply to producers from other countries, content types, or sectors. Second, the reliance on secondary data from commercial analytics firms and company self-reports means that key claims about revenue breakdowns, user demographics, and content strategy cannot be fully verified. These sources provide the best available public evidence but their methodological limitations constrain the precision of empirical claims. Third, the non-state actor classification, while carefully argued, cannot entirely rule out informal coordination between producers and state agencies that is not publicly documented. Fourth, the phenomenon's recency means long-term sustainability remains unknown. The industry achieved rapid growth between 2020 and 2025, but whether this constitutes long-standing transnational presence or an extended growth phase that may plateau or contract cannot be determined from the current study window.

Future research should pursue comparative cases examining whether similar patterns apply to Non-Chinese producers or non-entertainment content. Reception studies

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investigating how international audiences actually engage with micro-drama content would complement this study's focus on operational reach. Platform governance research examining how content policies and algorithmic changes affect transnational reach over time would address one of the key limitations of the current study. The micro-drama case illustrates that digitalization is reshaping the conditions of transnational participation. Understanding contemporary international relations requires accounting for the expanded range of actors that digital infrastructure now enables to operate across borders.

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