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# The Transmission Mechanism Through Which the Platform Economy Promotes Integrated Urban-Rural Development—Based on the Meituan Platform in Yanyuan County, Sichuan

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## Abstract

The urban-rural dual structure remains an issue in China's development, and the platform economy offers possibilities for addressing it. Existing studies have mainly verified its role in promoting urban-rural integration, while the underlying transmission mechanism requires further examination. This study proposes a "four-element, three-stage transmission" framework that treats the platform economy as a composite actor of external driving forces and an internal capability system. Taking the Meituan platform in Yanyuan County, Sichuan, as a single case, the study examines how the platform economy promotes urban-rural integration. The findings show that the platform economy is not a simple empowerment tool but a "three-in-one" system comprising technological infrastructure, a capability system, and operational rules, all of which are indispensable. Platform expansion results from policy guidance, capital pressure, and platform capabilities, whereas urban-rural integration is the objective outcome of the transmission chain rather than an expression of platform intent. Platform expansion is also not one-way technological implantation. Algorithms and rules must be adapted and "translated" to local sociocultural conditions, and local elites play an irreplaceable coordinating role. This study integrates fragmented mechanism pathways into a coherent transmission sequence and provides a new theoretical perspective on the platform economy and urban-rural integration.

## Keywords

platform economy, urban-rural integration, transmission mechanism, Yanyuan County, Meituan

## 1. Introduction

The urban-rural dual structure remains a fundamental problem facing China's social and economic development at present and for a relatively long period to come. Eliminating the urban-rural gap or promoting integration and moving toward common prosperity is an inevitable requirement of modernization. The rapid development of the platform economy has new significance for solving such problems. According to statistics for 2025, the total value of online retail sales in China's rural areas exceeded 3 trillion yuan, and there were approximately 20 million related merchants [1,2]. State policy has consistently encouraged this development, and the 2026 No. 1 Central Document explicitly called for efforts to "promote the penetration and empowering



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role of e-commerce platforms." Regarding the platform economy and urban-rural integration, their relationship is an academic issue that deserves attention in both theory and practice.

Most current empirical studies focus on testing the effects of the platform economy on urban-rural integrated development, but there remains room for further systematic analysis that disaggregates the underlying driving factors and the conduction mechanism, which this study terms the transmission mechanism. This study advances this line of inquiry by defining the platform economy as "a composite actor jointly constituted by external driving forces and an internal capability system," proposing a "four-element, three-stage transmission" analytical framework, and taking the development of the Meituan platform in Yanyuan County, Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, as a single case. It systematically addresses the sources of impetus, operating mechanisms, and implementation pathways through which the platform economy promotes urban-rural integrated development.

## 2. Literature Review

The core meaning of urban-rural integrated development lies in the two-way flow of factors between urban and rural areas, while one of the most central functions of the platform economy is to connect and match supply and demand. On this basis, the platform's three-layer structure may enable digital tools to extend into rural areas, remove informational and geographic barriers, and mobilize the willingness of urban and rural actors to participate, giving it the potential to become an important carrier for promoting the flow of urban and rural factors.

Existing literature has conducted confirmatory analyses of urban-rural integration from multiple aspects of the platform economy. Empirical evidence clearly shows that the platform economy significantly promotes urban-rural integrated development, with digital logistics serving as a key mediating variable [3]. By linking industrial chains, creating a unified market, and matching resources or factors, the platform economy promotes interdependence between urban and rural economies [4]. In terms of its operating mechanism, it enables the mutual flow of urban and rural factors through sharing and also uses technological means and market development to drive the emergence or transformation of rural industries [5]. Regarding the drivers of platform expansion into rural areas, scholars have concluded from case analyses that it results from the coordination of state policy, platform business logic, and regional culture [6].

A summary of the existing literature yields three characteristics. First, most current studies empirically examine the possible role of the platform economy in promoting urban-rural integration, but they do not analyze in detail the internal mechanism underlying this "promotion" [7,8]. Second, mechanisms such as industrial-chain connection, market unification, and factor coordination are generally presented as parallel "pathways," while explanations of their interdependence and sequence remain incomplete [9]. Third, existing studies indicate that platform expansion into rural areas is jointly driven by state policy guidance and platform business logic, but most remain within a binary "state-platform" perspective. They pay limited attention to how external driving forces are implemented through the platform's own capabilities and overlook the constraints that local rural social conditions place on the final implementation effect [10,11].

## 3. Case Analysis: The Four-Element, Three-Stage Transmission Mechanism of the Meituan Platform in Yanyuan County

Yanyuan County is a mountainous county in Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province. It was lifted out of poverty in 2020 and was included on the list of national key counties receiving assistance for rural revitalization in 2021. It has long faced poor transportation and limited market access. For a western county that was previously close to the margins of capital accumulation, it now provides a typical case for examining the contribution of the platform economy to urban-rural integration.

### 3.1 Manifestation of Driving Forces at the County Level: Policy Dividends and Market Space

From the perspective of county-level driving forces, local transportation, electricity, internet, and other infrastructure had been largely completed around 2017, creating the hardware conditions for digital platforms to enter. After Yanyuan was designated a key county for rural revitalization in 2021, related institutional



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barriers were gradually removed. Capital-driven characteristics were also prominent. The urban area of Yanyuan County had a permanent population of approximately 30,000, while more than 6,000 students at Yanyuan Ethnic Middle School and their accompanying families formed a stable consumer group, becoming an incremental market valued by platforms [6]. Meituan Food Delivery entered Yanyuan in 2018, reflecting platform capital's effort to tap incremental county-level markets, and its entry relied on the foundations provided by local infrastructure and the consumer market [6].

### 3.2 Local Implementation of Connectivity: From Technological Access to Rule Adaptation

Meituan adapted its "three-in-one" system of technology, capabilities, and rules to local conditions. In terms of technological access, compared with the manual dispatch model used by the local Aba Food Delivery service in earlier years, online dispatch through a mobile application (app) greatly improved delivery efficiency and helped the county connect to the digital economy at low cost. The three major capabilities of algorithms, logistics, and user networks were not simply copied. Algorithmic ratings compelled merchants and riders to improve their services; more than 30 food-delivery riders and more than 500 Meituan Select group leaders were organized locally, with approximately 2,000 orders per day [6]. The user network expanded the sales boundaries of local merchants, while the logistics system incorporated local neighborhood-based acquaintance networks into the division of delivery work.

As shown in Table 1, direct replication of unified platform rules can result in local maladaptation. Local agents undertake the "bricolage work" of institutional "translation," coordinating the platform, government, merchants, and riders while balancing data indicators with local realities [6]. However, flexible adaptation of rules also produces inconsistent implementation standards and increases potential regulatory risks.

*Table 1: Local Implementation of the Platform's Three-in-One Capability System in Yanyuan County*

| Level | Core Content | Specific Performance in Yanyuan County |
|---|---|---|
| Technological infrastructure layer | Algorithmic dispatch system and big-data analysis | Meituan Food Delivery entered in 2018; one-click ordering and real-time dispatch through the app |
| Capability system layer | Algorithmic recommendation, logistics network, and user network | More than 30 riders, more than 500 Meituan Select group leaders, and approximately 2,000 daily orders |
| Operational rules layer | Traffic allocation, incentive mechanisms, and rating system | The rating mechanism promoted service improvement, with local agents coordinating among parties |

### 3.3 Rural Responses and Two-Way Flows: How Factors Begin to Move

Judging from the signals released by the platform, rural responses in Yanyuan County basically occurred at three levels.

In response to the signals released by the platform, rural areas in Yanyuan reacted at the levels of labor, goods, and consumption. At the labor level, Meituan riders such as the Yi youth Buji Wang returned to their hometowns on their own initiative. After working away from home, they returned for local employment while also caring for their families, which differed from previous passive return migration [5]. At the goods level, specialty agricultural products such as Yanyuan apples expanded their sales channels through e-commerce. The average price of apples sold through platforms was 3 yuan higher per kilogram, more than 40% of farming households sold agricultural products online, and annual sales exceeded 100 million yuan. Apples, Sichuan peppercorns, walnuts, and other local specialties were shipped nationwide through logistics networks, enabling the two-way circulation of agricultural products to cities and industrial products to rural areas [6]. At the consumption level, food delivery and community e-commerce entered villages. For example, residents of Dazu Village near Lugu Lake ordered daily necessities online, urban consumption habits spread to rural areas, and the urban-rural consumption gap gradually narrowed.

## 4. Theoretical Framework: The Four-Element, Three-Stage Transmission Analytical Framework

This study proposes a "state guidance + capital drive → platform execution → rural response" four-element, three-stage transmission analytical framework. The "four elements" are state policy guidance, pressure for capital growth, core platform capabilities, and the responses of rural actors. The "three stages of transmission"



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are the three sequential links from the generation of external driving forces, to the platform's execution of connections, and then to the responses of rural actors.

## 4.1 First Stage of Transmission: The Dual Drivers of State Policy Guidance and Pressure for Capital Growth

The first stage of transmission answers the question, "Where does the driving force come from?" This study argues that the impetus for platform expansion into rural areas is not the platform's unilateral initiative but the result of the joint effects of state policy and capital pressure.

Regarding state policy guidance, the state continuously releases policy signals through the No. 1 Central Document, the "Digital Commerce for Agriculture" project, the "Digital Village" strategy, and other measures. These signals indicate that the rural market is a policy-supported direction and that platform expansion into rural areas can receive policy dividends and institutional safeguards. At the same time, the state has developed public infrastructure such as rural broadband networks and logistics systems, creating the prerequisites for platform expansion. Regarding pressure for capital growth, platforms, as market entities, face explicit performance-growth requirements, specifically reflected in core indicators such as daily active users, time spent by users, gross transaction value, and penetration in lower-tier markets. As internet-user growth in first- and second-tier cities gradually reaches its limit, nearly 500 million rural residents constitute a substantial potential incremental market. Pressure for capital performance growth drives platforms to consider expanding business into rural areas, but actual expansion still requires an assessment of infrastructure, profitability, and other practical conditions in those areas.

The state "guides" platform expansion by lowering transaction costs, while capital "pulls" platforms into rural areas through performance pressure. Together, these forces establish the driving structure for platform expansion. However, both are external forces; the actor that actually carries out the expansion remains the platform itself.

## 4.2 Second Stage of Transmission: Platforms Use Their Core Functions to Connect Urban and Rural Areas

After receiving the dual driving forces, the platform activates its own three-in-one system and converts the external driving forces into actual connecting actions.

Extension of the technological infrastructure layer. The platform transfers and adapts algorithmic dispatch systems, big-data analysis tools, and other technologies proven in urban markets to rural settings. Rural areas can directly access the platform's existing technological foundation without building it from scratch, thereby lowering the threshold for entering the modern market system.

Operation of the capability system layer. Algorithmic recommendation enables rural content to receive matched traffic exposure, objectively creating a channel through which rural actors can reach urban consumers. Logistics infrastructure enables the platform to extend delivery networks accumulated in cities to counties and townships at a marginal cost far below that of building new networks. User and creator networks allow rural actors to face a nationwide market as soon as they join the platform. Together, these three capabilities give the platform the marked advantage of continuously connecting urban and rural markets at relatively low cost and with broad coverage.

Coordination through the operational rules layer. Through traffic allocation and incentive mechanisms, the platform sends positive signals to rural content and agricultural-product transactions and actively allocates resources to guide participation.

## 4.3 Third Stage of Transmission: Responses of Rural Actors and the Formation of Urban-Rural Economic Circulation

After receiving traffic, income, and demonstration signals released by the platform, rural actors begin to take action by joining platforms, opening online stores, and participating in delivery networks. This stage of transmission answers the question, "Can the connection ultimately be realized?"



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The responses of rural actors do not occur automatically. The signals released by the platform must be "filtered" through local sociocultural conditions, including whether there are leaders familiar with platform rules, whether successful cases are available for imitation, and whether networks of relatives and friends provide support. Together, these factors affect the speed and depth of the response. When the number of participating actors reaches a critical point, network effects gradually emerge and promote the two-way flow of goods, information, and labor between urban and rural areas. However, the two-way flow of factors is only a necessary condition for urban-rural integrated development. Genuine urban-rural integration also requires multidimensional supporting arrangements in public services, social security, and other areas [12].

## 5. Conclusions

This study constructs a four-element, three-stage transmission analytical framework and uses the Meituan platform in Yanyuan County as a single case to examine the sources of impetus, operating mechanisms, and implementation pathways through which the platform economy promotes urban-rural integration. Because the framework is derived from one case, its general applicability still requires testing with cases from more regions. The study shifts the platform economy from functional description to structural analysis and defines it as a three-in-one composite system jointly composed of technology, capabilities, and rules. The findings show that platform expansion into rural areas is externally driven by state policy guidance and pressure for capital expansion and internally supported by the platform's own three-in-one capabilities; multiple forces jointly drive urban-rural integration. The four-element, three-stage transmission framework reveals a complete causal transmission chain. If any link among the driving forces, platform connection, and rural response breaks, the overall mechanism fails. Through the structural advantages of algorithms, logistics, and user networks, platforms establish extensive urban-rural connections at low cost. However, platform expansion is not simple replication and transplantation, and the coordinating role of local sociocultural conditions and local elites cannot be ignored.

This study is a single-case study that relies mainly on secondary materials and lacks first-hand fieldwork data. It also focuses on positive effects and does not sufficiently discuss negative issues such as riders' rights and algorithmic unfairness. Future research can compare multiple cases, incorporate analysis of the negative effects of platforms, and conduct long-term follow-up studies of county-level cases.

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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