



Scroll and Steam: Food Learning, Digital Migration, and Cultural Exchange on RedNote

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This essay examines how RedNote became a digital space where recipes, identities, and communities meet—through the everyday acts of scrolling, steaming, and sharing.

I. What is RedNote?

RedNote (小红书) was initially developed in 2013 as a lifestyle platform centered on shopping, beauty, and travel recommendations. Over time, it evolved into a hybrid between social media and e-commerce, fostering an interactive, community-driven space where users exchange experiences, seek advice, and engage in in-depth discussions on diverse topics—especially for food and lifestyle. With over 300 million monthly active users as of 2023, RedNote is one of the most widely used apps in China and increasingly influential internationally^[1].

Often referred to as "China's answer to Instagram," RedNote similarly blends social media with lifestyle content.^[2] However, while Instagram prioritizes personal branding, influencer culture, and trend-driven visibility, RedNote centers community building and long-form, knowledge-sharing posts. Central to this experience is its AI-powered algorithm, which curates personalized content based on user preferences, search history, and engagement patterns, fostering tight-knit digital communities^[3]. Unlike TikTok's

algorithm-driven virality, RedNote's AI-powered recommendation prioritizes user interest and content relevance over trend-chasing, encouraging deeper engagement through discussion-based posts and a comprehensive search function that facilitates discovery.

II. Researching in Digital Spaces

Social media platforms today are not just tools for sharing or communication—they are immersive digital spaces where people interact, express identity, and engage in everyday learning. These environments promote what scholars describe as a participatory culture, where users do not just consume information passively but contribute to its creation, circulation, and interpretation; knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue, translation, adaptation, and collective meaning-making.^{[4][5]} The participatory model of social media opens access to a broader and more diverse range of voices, including those traditionally excluded from academic or formal knowledge systems—activists, marginalized communities, and non-institutional experts.^[6] Learning in such a context becomes relational rather than instructional—shaped by users' social connections, shared interests, and lived experiences, rather than solely by expert authority.

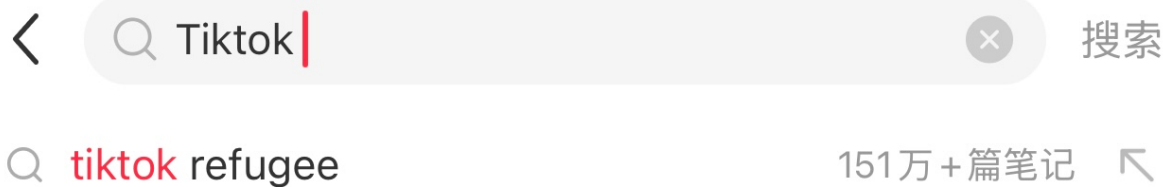
Not only do these platforms empower individuals to speak where they might otherwise go unheard, but they also create communities that transcend geographic borders, institutional boundaries, and linguistic divides. Digital spaces allow people to exchange personal stories, local knowledge, and everyday discoveries with others they may never meet in person. The absence of traditional gatekeepers—editors, institutions, or formal reference systems like Wikipedia or Baidu (知道)—gives way to more direct, user-to-user engagement. The disintermediated environment creates space not just for information exchange, but also for community building; as scholars such as Cappello argue, information and communication technologies (ICTs) function not only as tools, but as social environments that shape how people experience identity, creativity, and connection.^[7] In the case of RedNote, a fascinating shift came into focus at the beginning of 2025, when an unexpected influx of users transformed the platform's demographics and began bridging conversations across cultures.

III. Scroll & Steam

In early 2024, due to the increasing concern over TikTok's data privacy policies, the U.S. government issued an ultimatum: ByteDance, TikTok's parent company, was required to divest the app to a U.S. owner by January 19, 2025, or face a nationwide ban^[8]. As uncertainty loomed, many American TikTok users—anxious about losing access to their primary digital space—began migrating to RedNote. By mid-January 2025, RedNote became the most downloaded free app on the U.S. Apple App Store, marking an unprecedented shift in its user demographics.^[9] This wave of digital migration, often referred to as the "TikTok refugee" phenomenon, led to a sudden and widespread cross-cultural convergence on the platform.

As English-speaking users entered RedNote, they encountered a digital space deeply embedded in Chinese culture, sparking dynamic conversations around food, health, and lifestyle. The scale of this migration was staggering—according to CNN, within two days, over 700,000 new users joined, and the hashtag "TikTok refugee" amassed 250 million

views and 5.5 million comments, reflecting both curiosity and defiance toward the government's move on TikTok.^[10] As of April 6, 2025, “TikTok refugee” has been used more than 1.5 million times on RedNote, both by American users who tag to identify themselves and Chinese netizens asking questions about cultural differences.



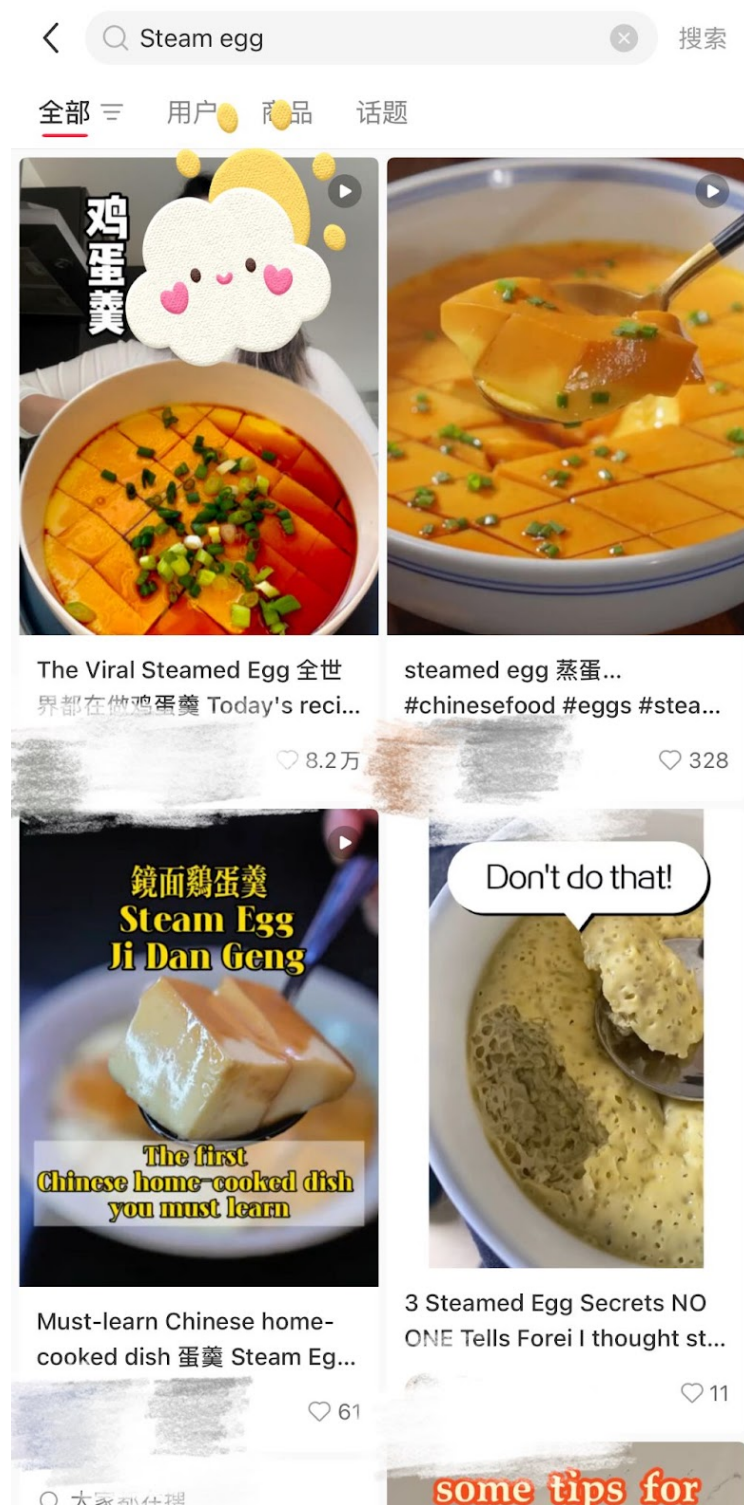
Above Image: Screenshot from RedNote showing the hashtag “TikTok refugee” used in over 1.5 million posts. Source: RedNote (小红书), accessed May 25, 2025.

The influx of non-chinese users interacted with their fellow “Tik Tok refugees,” as well as existing Chinese users, many of whom lived overseas, resulting in a uniquely multicultural digital space. Such experience was likely due to RedNote’s algorithm factoring in geographical location when displaying content on the home page and when pushing notifications, leading to existing (overseas) Chinese users and incoming English-speaking users seeing each other’s posts in their feeds. However, as more English-speaking users joined, the platform’s content landscape shifted, prompting adjustments to its AI-driven recommendation system to better accommodate its evolving user base. Within days, RedNote launched several tools to improve the user experience: a filter to select “English preferred” content, an AI-powered translation model, and a recalibrated algorithm designed to prioritize user interests over geographic proximity—likely lowering the weighting of location-based factors. These adjustments allowed new and existing users alike to engage with content relevant to their preferences and cultural backgrounds, facilitating a more fluid cross-cultural space rather than a segmented bilingual experience.

This influx of new users did more than shift RedNote’s language dynamics and algorithmic priorities; it also transformed how food knowledge is exchanged on the platform. As English-speaking users settled into a space full of Chinese culinary traditions, social norms, and digital engagement styles, many found themselves navigating an entirely new way of learning about food. From traditional Chinese remedies to viral home-cooked recipes, users engaged in discussions that spanned authenticity debates, adaptation strategies, and the challenges of cooking across language barriers and ingredients.

One recipe that went viral almost immediately was Ji Dan Geng (鸡蛋羹), a steamed egg dish often compared to a delicate custard. RedNote users around the world began trying out different versions of Ji Dan Geng shared by Chinese users. The dish is relatively simple and widely loved, with regional and personal variations—some with scallions, some with shrimp or minced meat, others just with eggs and water—circulating across the platform. Foreign users followed these posts closely, recreating the dish, sharing their results, and asking for feedback in the comments. Many chose different versions to try based on what ingredients they had access to, or which visual style appealed to them

most. Some posted photos or videos of their cooking process, often tagging the original creator or asking, “Did I do this right?”



Above Image Screenshot of four RedNote posts demonstrating different methods of making 鸡蛋羹 (Ji Dan Geng), a Chinese steamed egg dish. Source: RedNote (小红书), accessed May 25, 2025.

One widely liked post from a Chinese user joked: “Are Americans just naturally gifted at making custard?” The top-voted reply answered, “It’s because they’re more used to following precise measurements—we eyeball everything.” This playful back-and-forth

sparked further discussion around cooking habits, visual expectations, and the difference between intuitive and instruction-based cooking styles.



Above Image: Screenshot of a RedNote comment thread joking about Americans being naturally gifted at making custards, with follow-up discussion on measurement styles and cooking intuition. Source: RedNote (小红书), accessed May 25, 2025.

New users also picked up other Chinese dishes—fried rice, hot pot, herbal tea—as well as everyday practices like 喝热水 (drinking hot water, especially for women). These trends became moments of casual yet meaningful cultural exchange, as people asked about sourcing ingredients, whether their adaptations were “authentic,” and how certain foods were traditionally consumed.

However, behind the joy of culinary discovery lies a more complicated issue of translation, naming, and cultural appropriation. Ji Dan Geng was often translated as “egg custard” by English-speaking users, which sparked debate. Some users pointed out that “egg custard” refers to something quite different in Western culinary traditions, and that

the comparison risked compromising the dish’s cultural specificity. One Chinese user offered an intriguing analogy: “If people keep calling Ji Dan Geng ‘egg custard,’ then we might as well start calling hamburgers Rou Jia Mo (肉夹馍),” referring to a Chinese meat bun that shares only surface-level similarities. The comment received a wave of agreement, with 39000 likes, highlighting the tension between accessibility and cultural precision. In moments like these, food becomes more than something to cook and eat—it becomes a symbol of identity, history, and belonging.



Above Image: Side-by-side screenshots from RedNote showing user debate over translating “鸡蛋羹” (Ji Dan Geng) as “egg custard.” Source: RedNote (小红书), accessed May 25, 2025.

IV. Moving Forward

As I continued observing, it became clear that these seemingly small moments—how a dish is named, who gets to explain it—reveal deeper patterns in how people negotiate culture online. And they left me with more questions than answers: What kinds of foods have users been introduced to since joining RedNote? How have AI-driven translation tools, algorithmic curation, and community engagement shaped their culinary experiences? More broadly, what does this digital migration reveal about how people learn about food in digital spaces?

It is difficult to grasp the complete picture of a digital migration involving such a large and diverse population—especially considering the different mindsets users bring with them when first engaging with a new platform. Some members of the initial wave of

TikTok refugees have since returned to their original app, as the current administration has delayed its suspension. Yet many others have stayed, continuing to post videos and photo content, engaging with each other, and building new digital routines—learning and sharing their lives, passions, and food in the process.

At the moment, scholars across disciplines—including linguistics, media studies, and sociology—are beginning to examine the TikTok refugee phenomenon on RedNote. I hope to contribute to this growing conversation by focusing specifically on food learning and culinary exchange in the future. The observational research presented here suggests that there is much more to explore, particularly through participatory, ethnographic methods such as surveys and interviews.

To begin imagining what this future research could look like, I designed a survey to examine how users are navigating RedNote as a newly shared digital space and how they are making sense of the culinary knowledge they encounter there. While not distributed for this study, the survey is included below as a way to reflect on where the project could go next.

V. Appendix: Survey Questions for Proposed Research

This proposed survey is designed to collect insight into users' experiences navigating food content on RedNote, especially in the context of cross-cultural exchange. It includes questions about demographics, cooking and meal habits, translation challenges, and how users engage with food content through the platform. The goal is to better understand how RedNote facilitates food learning, how users adapt to unfamiliar culinary practices, and how they negotiate ideas of authenticity and accessibility in an algorithmically curated space.

Demographics

- What is your age group? (Under 18, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, 75+)
- How do you identify? (Female, Male, Prefer not to say, Other)
- Do you believe gender influences how people engage with food content online? Please illustrate your reason.
- What is your native language? (Chinese, English, Other)
- What is your proficiency level in English? (No Proficiency, Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced, Fluent/Native)
- What is your proficiency level in Chinese? (No Proficiency, Beginner, Intermediate, Advanced, Fluent/Native)
- Where are you currently located? (United States, China, Other)
- How many people live in your household (including yourself)? (1, 2, 3-4, 5+)

Social Media Usage

- How long have you used RedNote? (Less than 1 month, 1-6 months, 6 months-1 year, 1-2 years, 2-5 years, More than 5 years)
- Have you used TikTok before joining RedNote? If so, do you consider yourself a “TikTok refugee” on RedNote? (Yes - TikTok Refugee, Yes - not a refugee, No)

- Which social media platforms do you actively use? (Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter/X, Reddit, Pinterest, WeChat 微信, Bilibili B站, Douyin 抖音, QQ)

Cooking & Meal Habits

- Who usually does the cooking in your household? (I cook most/all meals, Share cooking, Someone else cooks, Rarely cook)
- How often do you cook at home? (Every day, Few times a week/month, Rarely, Never)
- How do you usually plan your meals? (Cook fresh daily, Batch cook, Occasionally cook, Don't plan)
- Frequency of takeout/delivery, frozen meals, restaurants, instant meals (Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always)
- Since using RedNote, have you noticed a change in how often you cook? (Cook more, little more, unchanged, less)
- Since using RedNote, have you started cooking new cuisines? (Chinese, Western, Other international, Unchanged)

Engagement with Food Content

- How often do you browse food-related content on RedNote? (More than 5/day, Few/day, Daily, Weekly, Rarely, Never)
- How often do you post food-related content? (Frequently, Occasionally, Rarely, Never)
- Engagement with food content (Watch only, Comment, Save recipes, Post own content, Adapt recipes, Don't engage)

Cultural & Language Dynamics

- Have you ever cooked a dish from RedNote posted in a language you don't speak? (Yes, No, Other)
- Factors influencing cooking a recipe from RedNote (Authenticity, Native language, Visual appeal, Multi-language subtitles, Ingredient availability, Simplicity, Dietary preference)
- Preference in recipe authorship (Chinese user - Chinese, Chinese user - English, Western user - English, Western user - Chinese)
- Have you faced challenges related to measurement units? How handled? (Online converters, Estimated, Followed exactly, Avoided recipe)
- Preferred methods for handling recipes from different languages (Automatic translation, Community translation, External translations, Own language preference)
- Translation tool effectiveness (Scale 1-5: Useless to Very Helpful)
- Ever abandoned a recipe due to language barriers? (Yes, No)
- Have you made a special trip for ingredients due to a RedNote recipe?

(Frequently, Occasionally, Substitute, No special trips)

- Changes in food content observed (Western recipes, Fusion/adapted recipes, English-language content, No major change)
- Do you think TikTok refugees have changed food sharing on RedNote?

Additional Optional Questions

- Favorite recipes found on RedNote
- Willingness to participate in follow-up interviews and provide contact information

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[10] *ibid.*

Author Bio:

Adeline Rong is a dual-degree student in Food Studies and Library & Information Science, with a background in urban studies and anthropology. She approaches her work with an ethnographic lens and a love for participant-observation. While writing this paper, she followed multiple 鸡蛋羹 (Ji Dan Geng) recipes with great success—and continues to engage with food content on RedNote, both as a researcher and a curious home cook.

ARTICLES