

A Study on the Dissemination of Rural Culture in Documentary Reality Shows—A Case Study of Become a Farmer

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Abstract. Rural culture is an important part of Chinese culture, and its contemporary expression and communication methods are constantly evolving with the profound changes in the media environment. This paper focuses on the rural documentary variety "Become a Farmer", and discusses how to realize the modern translation and value reconstruction of rural culture in the aspects of program content, image construction and cultural connotation by case analysis and close reading of the text. It is found that "Planting the Land" shows the whole process of young people returning to their hometowns in a realistic style, and integrates elements such as scientific and technological agriculture, intergenerational emotion, cooperative spirit and media interaction, effectively breaking the traditional stereotype of farmers who face the loess and face the sky, and reshaping the younger generation's cognition of the countryside and land. However, the program also faces the challenge of content quality and cross-cultural communication efficiency, and its social value and international communication potential are also worthy of further consideration. It is gratifying that such documentary variety shows provide a new paradigm for the media communication of rural culture in the context of the new era.

Keywords: dissemination of rural culture, Documentary variety show, Become a Farmer, media narration, cultural identity

1. Introduction

Rural culture is the foundation of Chinese national civilization, rooted in the historical experience and collective memory of farming society, bearing regional cultural traditions and lifestyles handed down from generation to generation. However, in the wave of rapid urbanization and modernization, rural culture is experiencing the risk of being marginalized, fractured or even alienated. The rural population continues to flow out, and the young generation's emotional connection with land and tradition is gradually weak, and the phenomenon of "cultural hollowing out" is particularly prominent. The live transmission and regeneration mechanism of rural culture need to seek a breakthrough in the new media ecology.

Traditional rural culture used to rely on literature and drama to express and spread, from Lu Xun's Hometown, Shen Congwen's Xiangxi Narration, Xiao Hong's Biography of Hulan River, to

Mo Yan's "Gaomi Northeast Township", all of which were based on rural life. However, these works are mostly confined to paper media. Although they have profound cultural expressive power, there are natural limitations in audience coverage, communication timeliness and media adaptability. Especially in the context of global communication, it is difficult for these text-based carriers to effectively break through the cognitive barrier and form a broad resonance of cultural identity. In this context, the rapid development of information and digital media, audio-visual media has gradually become the main position of cultural narrative, providing new possibilities for the expression and dissemination of rural culture.

As a documentary variety show in rural areas that has attracted much attention in recent years, *Become a Farmer* takes ten young people as the main body and presents the whole process of farming, breeding and harvesting through documentary narrative strategies. The program combines science and technology agriculture, intergenerational emotion, cooperative spirit and media interaction, and creates a group image of contemporary "new farmers". While showing "real labor" and "Xinxiang village", it also reshapes the imagination of the younger generation on land and labor, which is an example of the innovation of rural culture communication path. Facing the strategic background of rural revitalization in the new era and the realistic challenge of cultural transformation, how to realize the effective dissemination and value activation of rural culture by means of media narration and cultural practice? It has become an issue that needs to be discussed in depth in academic circles. Based on this, this paper takes *Become a Farmer* as the research object, focusing on its program content, image construction and cultural connotation, aiming at responding to the proposition of "how to tell local stories well by new media" and providing theoretical and practical reference for the dynamic continuation and contemporary expression of rural culture.

2. Literature review

2.1. Overview of the theoretical evolution of rural culture

As an important part of China traditional culture, rural culture has always been one of the research focuses of sociology, linguistics, literature and other disciplines. Fei Xiaotong pointed out in "Local China" that "from the grassroots level, China society is local." [1] This "local nature" deeply rooted in cultural genes still exerts a subtle influence on Chinese's values. Mr. Li Zehou's "accumulation theory" aims to reveal the historical generation mechanism of human aesthetic psychological structure [2]. The theory emphasizes that human aesthetic psychological structure is a long-term historical practice, which provides theoretical support for understanding rural culture from the aesthetic point of view. China's local novels in the 20th century are widely regarded as an important carrier to reflect the changes of rural society and the transformation of national spirit. On China Literature in the Twentieth Century provides a profound theoretical background for us to understand the social function and literary value of local novels [3]. From Lu Xun's enlightenment criticism to Mo Yan's realism, local novels have always been an important mirror image of China's social changes, bearing the multiple missions of writing history and enlightening people's hearts.

2.2. Survey on the media transformation of rural culture

Before the rise of network communication, cultural communication mainly relied on paper media. However, the inevitable deviation in language translation will reduce the accuracy and effectiveness of cultural communication. In China's Literary Translation: From Domestication to Alienation, Sun Zhili pointed out the limitation of maintaining the original cultural characteristics in cross-cultural

communication [4]. The rise of network technology can show the cultural background more intuitively, thus making up for this limitation to some extent and promoting more comprehensive and accurate cultural transmission. Ding Chao's "Study on the Construction of Mimic Environment of Slow Variety Show — Taking the Desired Life as an Example" points out that the media selectively presents and beautifies the rural natural and human environment through symbols, thus creating a "mimetic" and idealized rural landscape. However, this kind of construction is not completely faithful to reality, and it is divorced from the real rural life context to a certain extent, which leads to misunderstanding by the audience [5]. Thus, authenticity in rural variety shows should be the core pursuit. Although the mimicry environment has certain aesthetic and emotional value, if it is excessively beautified or divorced from reality, it will not only lead to the psychological gap of the audience, but also strengthen the stereotype of the countryside, which will hinder the understanding and dissemination of the real rural culture.

2.3. Rural communication in the new era

Driven by the rural revitalization strategy, the spread of rural culture has gradually gained a wider discourse space and diversified expressions. Ren Tingyi and Qin Junxiang pointed out in "Rural Revitalization and Cultural Inheritance in the Dissemination of Documentary Images-An Observation on the Creation of Qingdao rural culture Documentary in the New Era" that images can build a bridge between rural culture and contemporary society through the dual perspectives of "rural revitalization" and "cultural inheritance" [6]. At the same time, as a new form of cultural communication, rural variety shows further expand the expression boundary and social influence of rural culture. Sophir Hwang and Li Mengjie, when analyzing *Become a Farmer*, pointed out that the program embedded agricultural knowledge, local feelings and rural revitalization issues in entertainment communication [7]. Under the background of rural revitalization, the spread of rural culture has extended from traditional literary creation to more popular and younger media forms such as variety shows and short videos. This change not only enriches the expression of rural culture, but also provides a new path for its development in modern society.

To sum up, although the existing research has made some achievements in the theoretical evolution, media transformation and new era communication of rural culture, there are still obvious gaps, and the internal communication logic of local documentary variety such as *Become a Farmer* has not been discussed in depth. Therefore, this paper intends to promote the theoretical deepening of local cultural communication research in the context of media integration from the dimensions of program content, image construction and cultural connotation.

3. Analysis and findings

3.1. Program content: integration of farming practice and interpersonal cooperation

Become a Farmer is different from the traditional variety entertainment program, which takes the realistic idea of "agriculture-oriented" as the narrative core and presents distinct realistic narrative characteristics. The program completely recorded the whole process of ten young "new farmers" working in a hundred acres of farmland for 192 days to witness the growth of wheat, and carefully captured the links of young people building planting greenhouses, developing vegetable cultivation and lobster breeding during the slack season, strengthened the simple logic of "no pains, no gains" and conveyed the agricultural philosophy of "believing in the power of the land". Different from the common "comfortable look and feel" of slow variety, every task is not interrupted by fast-paced

editing, which highlights the periodicity, labor and uncontrollable nature of agricultural production and strengthens the realistic background.

In addition, the program attaches great importance to the value of collective labor and interpersonal cooperation, highlighting the collaborative nature of agricultural production. At the beginning of the first season, ten young people grabbed rice overnight in the cold winter, carried 30 tons of chemical fertilizer together, repaired the Houdoumen dormitory together, and delivered lambs to realize their awe of life together ... It is a visual reconstruction of the internal operation logic of the local society. This narrative structure with agriculture as the link not only vividly interprets the concept of "harmony" in China's traditional farming culture, but also provides a new mode of collective identity for contemporary youth based on land and labor.

Fei Xiaotong pointed out when discussing the cooperation mode of rural society, "Business cannot exist in a close blood society. People's communication depends on human feelings and reciprocity. " [1] (108) It is this modern "consanguineous substitution" relationship based on common labor and mutually beneficial cooperation that young people have established in the program. They have formed a new social connection through collective labor, and reappeared the ideal neighborhood relationship of "helping each other in sickness and in health" in the rural society.

3.2. Image construction: the change of tradition and modernity in the rural space of natural writing

The image language of "Planting Farmland" continues the naturalistic tradition in documentary images, and depicts natural elements such as fields, seasons, weather and farm tools with a large number of empty mirrors, distant views and overhead shots, thus constructing an infectious local environment and stimulating the original charm of rural culture. In the current context of "fast-food" narration, the program group still insists on increasing the input of time and cost, and adopts a long-term and pure recording shooting method. Yang Changling, the general director, said: "In the final analysis, the program of farming is still a story of people, a story of people's growth and transformation. It is not established to tell a thing without people." [8] Therefore, the lens of the program always takes the documentary perspective as a bystander and maintains purity in shooting methods.

In composition, programs often use telephoto and smooth light to form a poetic and realistic visual atmosphere; Pay attention to the naturalness of the countryside through empty mirrors and distant views, such as the lens slowly passing through the tender green wheat seedlings in early spring, the golden rice waves in the hot summer sun, the busy scene in autumn harvest season and the quiet land in winter. These pictures embody the farming time sequence of "spring grows in summer, autumn harvests in winter" and convey the time texture and vitality carried by the land. In addition, the program is good at using wide-angle lens to capture the vast field and the handover of heaven and earth, the continuous ridges displayed by drone aerial photography, and the silhouette of teenagers returning from work at sunset, which visually strengthens the symbiotic relationship of "man-land-nature".

It is worth mentioning that the aerial camera in the program records the scenes of modern agricultural technology, such as drones with precise fertilization over wheat fields and automatic irrigation systems in the fields, so as to highlight the efficient rhythm of science and technology integrating into agriculture from a bird's eye view. Through the comparison of visual technology in the early and late stages of the program, these shots profoundly reveal the coexistence and change of old and new modes of production in rural space, which constitutes a visual metaphor and symbolizes

the transformation of China agriculture from traditional farming to intelligent mechanized large-scale agriculture.

The visual presentation of youth groups is also one of the highlights of the program. The program constructs the images of ten "new farmers" as dual identities of "laborers" and "communicators". On the one hand, they cultivated the land through labor, on the other hand, they recorded and disseminated the labor process by means of short videos, live broadcasts, daily vlog and other new media, and jointly constructed a vivid picture of contemporary rural life. Teenagers learn agricultural skills through vlog records, share the working process and achievements in real time through live broadcast, and further deliver agricultural products directly to consumers. These image forms break the closed narrative of traditional variety shows and make local life enter the public view in a real, instant and interactive way. It not only shows the diversified formats of agriculture in the new era, but also shows a brand-new path for the younger generation to realize their self-worth and social value in the countryside, attracting young audiences' attention to local issues.

3.3. Cultural connotation: new local narration and value communication

The rural life presented by this variety show is completely different from the previous "Xanadu" and romantic rural narrative. In terms of cultural significance, *Become a Farmer* constructs a new "new rural narrative" model, the core of which is to re-bind land, labor and youth, which not only carries the traditional respect for land, nature and collectivism, but also integrates the contemporary expression of science and technology, innovation and individual growth, breaking the singleness and rigidity of traditional rural narrative, and conveying new value recognition through audio-visual language. In this process, the audience strongly felt the hardships of labor and the joy of harvest, thus establishing emotional resonance.

On this basis, the program further responded to the proposition of the times of "rural revitalization". The program group abandoned the traffic stars and chose ten "vegetarian" young people to take root in the land, responding to the social concern of "what are contemporary youth". In the program, the average age of the guests is about 23 years old, and most of them are young artists or college graduates. For them, this "return to the land" is not out of escape from urban life or nostalgia romance, and returning home is no longer "forced" but "choice"; Agriculture is no longer "backward" but the future of "sustainable development". The program tells the meaning of "farming" from their perspective, which makes the inheritance of rural culture more expressive and stimulates more young people's imagination and interest in "returning home to start a business". The "non-elitism" of the youth image is also one of the reasons why the program can reach a wider audience. They did not deliberately "pretend to be dirt" or melodramatic literature and art, but formed an equal and true emotional connection with the audience as an "ordinary person".

Compared with the direct expression of traditional main melody literary works, the program pursues the natural growth of values in the audience's emotional experience. The emotional connection between youth and land, and then extended to the substitution and projection of the audience level. Many viewers express their identity substitution in the form of "gang members" through barrage and social media comments, which transcends the objectiveness of viewing and turns into resonant participation. The dedication of Zhong Lin, a young man in the program, deeply touched the audience. This sincerity promoted the sales of local high-quality agricultural products in the follow-up program. This phenomenon embodies the logic of the construction of "affective community" in communication, that is, the media activates the individual's sense of belonging and participation at the cultural level through "empathy performance".

In recent years, "Become a Farmer" was successfully selected for the Magnolia Award in the 28th Shanghai TV Festival, and was also invited to participate in a professional seminar jointly sponsored by the State Administration of Radio and Television and the China Television Art Committee, leading the innovative trend of rural themes. It not only resonates widely at home, but also transcends cultural differences, and becomes an important window to show the new look of rural China to the world. Therefore, Become a Farmer not only realizes the innovative expression of rural culture in the content level, but also enhances the discourse influence of rural narrative in China in the cultural soft power level.

4. Discussion

4.1. Advantages and limitations of rural documentary variety show

General Secretary Xi Jinping pointed out that "when choosing China stories for international communication, we should pay attention to seeking common symbols under the guidance of common values, so as to stimulate broad emotional resonance, so as to realize the international expression and dissemination of China culture." [9] Become a Farmer does not fall into the visual trap of "consuming the countryside" or "mirroring homesickness" in the past, but tries to establish a "co-farming" viewing relationship in the presentation of de-labeling and de-landscaping. This relationship breaks through the narrative framework of binary opposition between urban and rural areas, and strengthens the emotional link between urban youth and rural culture, which is of great significance to the construction of cultural identity. More crucially, the program expands the boundary of rural culture communication through short videos, barrage interaction and other media mechanisms, so that it can gain the kinetic energy of reproduction in social media space. It can be said that "Planting Land" provides an operable realistic sample and theoretical analysis paradigm for the dissemination of rural culture.

The program embeds educational function under the shell of variety show, and realizes "soft implantation" through emotional and humanistic narration, which not only enhances the impression, but also enhances the transmission efficiency of cultural values, providing an effective path for the spread of rural culture in the context of new media and the construction of cultural soft power. This kind of rural documentary variety shows emphasize modern values such as youth returning home, science and technology helping agriculture, collective struggle and land complex, which not only echoes the national strategy of "revitalizing the countryside", but also conforms to the concern of young people around the world for rebuilding the primary industry.

Although Become a Farmer has some innovative advantages in visual presentation and cultural communication, there are still some limitations. First of all, as a mass entertainment product, program production is driven by ratings, advertising revenue and traffic data, and its documentary nature always swings between business logic and real presentation, and some scenes tend to be overly beautified or emotionally rendered. When the boundary between documentary and entertainment is blurred, it may affect the public's understanding of the real rural environment, even make cultural communication fall into a "landscape" narrative and weaken social credibility. Secondly, this kind of program shows an obvious tendency of urbanization and youthfulness in audience orientation and aesthetic orientation. In essence, the logic of program communication takes the urban middle class as the implicit audience, and its "returning narrative" responds more to the emotional imagination of young urban groups to the countryside, but tends to ignore the acceptance of middle-aged and old people. Finally, at the content level, the program mainly focuses on the labor process and personal growth, and fails to explore the structural and institutional issues behind the

agricultural system. The shooting location is concentrated in areas with developed economy and perfect infrastructure, such as Xihu District of Hangzhou, and the narrative focus does not touch on real issues such as land property rights, resource allocation, and urban-rural gap. Although this narrative strategy of "de-regionalization" is beneficial to mainstream communication, it simplifies the complexity of rural areas in China to some extent and weakens the publicity and criticism of the program.

4.2. New media context of local cultural expression turn

Literary creation is subjective and instantaneous, and literary works themselves have certain reading barriers, so it is limited to spread rural culture by literary means. In contrast, network technology and digital technology provide a brand-new ecological environment for the production of cultural content. In this ecological environment, netizens are the leading force in the production of cultural content, and their content creation, sharing and clicking provide fundamental support for cultural content providers and operators [10]. These are undoubtedly the continuation of cultural vitality. Therefore, the success of "Planting the Land" verifies the public potential of entertainment programs in the digital media era: the media is no longer just a "communicator", but an important field for the generation of cultural significance.

Thanks to the rapid development of digital technology and network platform, the dissemination mode of rural culture has changed significantly. New media forms such as short video, film variety and live broadcast have greatly expanded the expression and reception path of rural culture. For example, Li Ziqi created an idealized oriental pastoral life through short videos, and successfully spread China's traditional farming aesthetics on the international platform. Teacher Chen Yi of Suzhou University believes that "Li Ziqi cleverly avoided the existence of this modern operating system, and her videos provided a powerful illusion for contemporary people-as a laborer growing and cooking food by himself, it seems that she has no connection with the outside world and has become a paradise that can be self-sufficient and undisturbed" [11]. Similarly, non-legacy creators such as Shanbai and Nanxiang use short videos to show traditional handicrafts and realize the modern transformation of non-legacy culture; The film and television works with rural themes, such as "The Life I yearn for", "The Great River" and Minning Town, have jointly constructed a diverse, three-dimensional and modern rural image pedigree of China.

Not only has the form of communication changed, but the content focus of rural culture communication has also shifted: from the early emphasis on amorous feelings description and nostalgic narration, it has gradually turned to social concern with realistic orientation. While recording the relationship between land and people, *Become a Farmer* also undertakes the social responsibility of guiding the public to pay attention to rural development and conveying the correct concept of labor. This "new content" is no longer a one-way and romantic local narrative, but a cultural practice with interactive, constructive and social mobilization.

The key to effective cultural communication lies in whether the communication symbols can meet the emotional needs and contemporary values of the audience. The themes such as "Youth Growth", "Symbiosis of Science and Technology with Nature" and "Collective Struggle" embodied in *Become a Farmer* have universal cultural implications and belong to the common emotional symbols of human beings, which will help to weaken language barriers, enhance the acceptance of international communication, and then build a new image of China. In the future, the local narrative should not stick to the binary opposition of "tradition/modernity" and "backwardness/advancement", but present the diverse features of rural areas in China, and break the stereotype of "traditional agricultural power" through the image of "new farmers".

5. Conclusion

For a long time, documentary variety shows are often placed in the fuzzy zone between entertainment and recording in China TV communication system. However, the appearance of "Farming" has brought a turn and breakthrough to the functional orientation of documentary variety. It is found that the value of *Become a Farmer* has surpassed the realistic concern about the strategy of "rural revitalization" and aroused the public's re-understanding of "land" and "root" on the spiritual level. "Planting Land" can be called "an innovative practice sample of rural culture communication under the media environment in the new era".

Of course, there are still some shortcomings in this study: first, the analysis of *Become a Farmer* is mainly based on personal observation and text interpretation, lacking the support of quantitative research methods such as questionnaire survey and data statistics; Secondly, the actual influence of the effectiveness angle on the audience's concept, attitude and behavior intention is not accepted, and it is difficult to fully reflect its communication effect and social influence, so the combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods can be further strengthened.

In the future, the dissemination of rural culture needs more narrative innovation and technical integration based on realistic soil, which should not only adhere to the "sincerity" of cultural expression, but also expand the "vastness" of communication path. In this process, rural documentary variety, as a media form with both temperature and thickness, is expected to become an important bridge connecting tradition and modernity, urban and rural areas and youth, land and the public.

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