

A Study on the Dissemination of Rural Culture in Documentary Reality Shows—A Case Study of Let’s Farm

Xinzhu Ding

*School of Literature, Suzhou University, Suzhou, China
1595865407@qq.com*

Abstract. As a vital component of Chinese civilization, rural culture is continuously evolving in its contemporary expression and dissemination due to profound changes in the media landscape. Through case analysis and close textual reading, this study examines how the rural documentary variety show *Let’s Farm* achieves the modern translation and value reinterpretation of rural culture via its program content, visual construction, and cultural implications. The findings reveal that *Let’s Farm* realistically portrays the entire process of young people returning to the countryside to engage in agricultural work. By integrating elements such as technological agriculture, intergenerational emotions, collaborative spirit, and media interaction, the program effectively dismantles the stereotypical image of farmers as “toiling with faces to the soil and backs to the sky,” thereby reshaping the younger generation’s perception of the countryside and the land. However, the program also faces challenges in content quality and cross-cultural communication effectiveness, while its social value and potential for international dissemination warrant further exploration. Nevertheless, such documentary variety shows present an innovative approach to the mediated dissemination of rural culture in the contemporary context.

Keywords: rural culture dissemination, documentary variety show, *Let’s Farm*, media narrative, cultural identity

1. Introduction

Rural culture, rooted in the historical experiences and collective memory of agrarian society, serves as the foundation of Chinese civilization, embodying regional traditions and intergenerational ways of life. However, amid rapid urbanization and modernization, rural culture faces risks of marginalization, fragmentation, and alienation. The continuous outflow of rural populations and the weakening emotional connection of younger generations to the land and traditions have led to a noticeable phenomenon of “cultural hollowing-out.” The living transmission and regeneration of rural culture urgently require innovative approaches within the new media ecosystem.

Traditionally, rural culture relied primarily on print media and performing arts for expression and dissemination. Literary works such as Lu Xun’s *My Old Home*, Shen Congwen’s *Xiangxi Narratives*, Xiao Hong’s *Tales of Hulan River*, and Mo Yan’s *Gaomi Northeast Township* all centered on rural life. Despite their profound cultural expressiveness, these works were largely confined to print media, which limited their audience reach, timeliness of dissemination, and

adaptability to contemporary media forms. Particularly in the context of global communication, textual media struggle to overcome cognitive barriers and foster broad cultural resonance. Against this backdrop, the rapid development of information and digital technologies has elevated audiovisual media to the forefront of cultural narration, opening new possibilities for the expression and dissemination of rural culture.

As a rural documentary variety show that has attracted significant attention in recent years, *Let's Farm* focuses on ten young participants, employing a documentary-style narrative to fully depict their processes of planting, breeding, and harvesting. By integrating technological agriculture, intergenerational emotions, collaborative spirit, and media interaction, the program constructs a portrait of the “new farmer,” showcasing “authentic labor” and “the new countryside,” while also reshaping the younger generation’s imagination of land and labor. It serves as an exemplary model for innovating the dissemination pathways of rural culture. In the context of the rural revitalization strategy and the practical challenges of cultural transformation, how media narratives and cultural practices can facilitate the effective dissemination and value enhancement of rural culture has become an urgent academic question. Accordingly, this paper takes *Let's Farm* as its research object, focusing on its program content, visual construction, and cultural connotations, aiming to address the contemporary issue of “how new media can effectively narrate rural stories” and provide theoretical and practical references for the living continuity and contemporary expression of rural culture.

2. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical evolution of rural culture studies

As a crucial component of traditional Chinese culture, rural culture has long been a focus of research in sociology, linguistics, and literature. Fei Xiaotong noted in *From the Soil* that “from the base level, Chinese society is fundamentally rural.” [1] This “rural nature,” deeply embedded in cultural genes, continues to subtly influence Chinese values. Li Zehou’s “Theory of Sedimentation” aims to reveal the historical formation mechanism of human aesthetic psychology [2], emphasizing that aesthetic structures emerge through long-term historical practice, thus providing theoretical support for understanding rural culture from an aesthetic perspective. Twentieth-century Chinese rural fiction is widely regarded as an important medium reflecting rural social transformation and national spiritual transition. The essay “On 'Twentieth-Century Chinese Literature'” offers a profound theoretical foundation for understanding the social function and literary value of rural fiction [3]. From Lu Xun’s enlightenment critique to Mo Yan’s realism, rural fiction has consistently served as a mirror of Chinese social change, undertaking the multiple missions of recording history and enlightening the people.

2.2. Media transformation of rural culture

Before the rise of online communication, cultural dissemination relied mainly on print media. However, inevitable deviations in language translation often reduced the accuracy and effectiveness of cultural transmission. Sun Zhili, in *Translation in China: From Domestication to Foreignization*, highlights the limitations of preserving original cultural characteristics in cross-cultural communication [4]. The emergence of internet technology enables more intuitive presentation of cultural contexts, thereby partially overcoming these limitations and promoting more comprehensive and accurate cultural transmission. In Ding Chao’s “A Study on the Construction of Simulated

Environments in Slow Variety Shows: Taking Back to Field as an Example,” it is pointed out that media selectively present and embellish rural natural and human environments through symbols, creating a “simulated” and idealized rural landscape [5]. However, such constructions are not entirely faithful to reality and, to some extent, deviate from authentic rural life, leading to audience misconceptions. Thus, authenticity should be the core pursuit in rural variety shows. While simulated environments possess certain aesthetic and emotional value, excessive beautification or detachment from reality may not only create psychological dissonance among audiences but also reinforce rural stereotypes, ultimately hindering the understanding and dissemination of authentic rural culture.

2.3. Rural communication in the new era

Driven by the rural revitalization strategy, the dissemination of rural culture has gained broader discursive space and diverse modes of expression. Ren Tingyi and Qin Junxiang observe in “Rural Revitalization and Cultural Heritage in Documentary Film: Observations on the Production of Rural Culture Documentaries in Qingdao in the New Era” that visual media can bridge rural culture and contemporary society through the dual perspectives of “rural revitalization” and “cultural heritage.” [6] Meanwhile, rural-themed variety shows, as an emerging form of cultural communication, further expand the expressive boundaries and social influence of rural culture. In their analysis of Let’s Farm, Huang Wen and Li Mengjie note that the program embeds agricultural knowledge, rural sentiments, and rural revitalization themes within its entertainment content [7]. Against the backdrop of rural revitalization, the dissemination of rural culture has extended from traditional literary creation to more popular and youth-oriented media forms such as variety shows and short videos. This shift not only enriches the modes of expression for rural culture but also provides new pathways for its development in modern society.

In summary, while existing research has achieved certain results in the theoretical evolution, media transformation, and contemporary dissemination of rural culture, significant gaps remain. The intrinsic communication logic of rural documentary variety shows like Let’s Farm has yet to be thoroughly explored. Therefore, this paper aims to advance the theoretical depth of rural culture communication studies within the context of media convergence by examining dimensions such as program content, visual construction, and cultural connotations.

3. Analysis and findings

3.1. Program content: integration of farming practices and interpersonal collaboration

Unlike traditional entertainment variety shows, Let’s Farm centers its narrative on an “agriculture-first” realist philosophy, exhibiting distinct realist storytelling characteristics. The program meticulously documents ten young “new farmers” working on a hundred acres of farmland for 192 days, witnessing the entire growth cycle of wheat. It closely captures the youths building greenhouses, developing vegetable cultivation during the off-season, and engaging in crayfish farming, reinforcing the simple logic that “no pains, no gains” and conveying an agricultural philosophy of “trusting the power of the land.” In contrast to the “comfort-focused viewing” typical of slow-paced variety shows, each task is presented without interruption by fast-paced editing. This approach highlights the cyclical, labor-intensive, and unpredictable nature of agricultural production, strengthening the program’s realist foundation.

Moreover, the program emphasizes the value of collective labor and interpersonal collaboration, underscoring the cooperative nature of agricultural production. In the first season, the ten young people work through the night in winter to harvest rice, jointly transport 30 tons of fertilizer, repair the collective dormitory at Houdoumen, and assist in the birth of a lamb—all while collectively experiencing reverence for life. This serves as a visual reconstruction of the internal logic of rural communities. This narrative structure, anchored in agriculture, vividly interprets the concept of “harmony and unity” in traditional Chinese farming culture while offering contemporary youth a new model of collective identity based on land and labor.

When discussing cooperative models in rural societies, Fei Xiaotong pointed out that “commerce cannot exist in a close-knit kinship society. Interactions rely on personal relationships and reciprocity.” [1](108) The young people in the program establish precisely this modern “substitute kinship” relationship based on shared labor and mutual cooperation. Through collective work, they form new social bonds, recreating the ideal neighborly relationship of “mutual watchfulness and assistance in times of illness” found in rural communities.

3.2. Visual construction: naturalistic depiction of tradition and modernity in rural spaces

The visual language of Let’s Farm continues the “naturalist” tradition of documentary filmmaking. It employs extensive empty shots, long shots, and aerial perspectives to depict natural elements such as fields, seasons, weather, and farming tools, thereby constructing a deeply evocative rural environment that highlights the primal charm of rural culture. In an era dominated by “fast-food” narratives, the production team remains committed to investing significant time, adopting an extended timeline and purely observational filming approach. Executive Director Yang Changling states: “At its core, Let’s Farm is fundamentally about human stories—stories of personal growth and transformation. Without people, the narrative simply doesn’t hold.” [8]Consequently, the program consistently adopts a documentary-style observational lens, maintaining purity in its filming approach.

In terms of composition, the show frequently uses telephoto lenses and front lighting to create a poetic yet authentic visual atmosphere. It emphasizes capturing the natural essence of the countryside through empty shots and wide-angle views—such as lenses gliding over tender green wheat sprouts in early spring, golden rice waves under the scorching summer sun, bustling autumn harvest scenes, and tranquil winter landscapes. These images embody the agricultural cycle of “spring birth, summer growth, autumn harvest, winter storage,” conveying the temporal texture and vitality inherent in the land. Additionally, the program skillfully employs wide-angle lenses to capture the vastness of fields and the horizon, while drone aerial shots reveal endless ridges and silhouettes of youths returning from work at sunset, visually reinforcing the symbiotic relationship between “people, land, and nature.”

Notably, aerial shots document modern agricultural technologies—drones applying precision fertilizer over wheat fields, automated irrigation systems in action—highlighting the efficient rhythms enabled by technology through bird’s-eye perspectives. By contrasting pre- and post-production visual techniques, these shots profoundly reveal the coexistence and transition of old and new production methods within rural landscapes, forming a visual metaphor that symbolizes China’s agricultural shift from traditional farming to intelligent, mechanized large-scale agriculture.

The program also emphasizes the visual representation of its young protagonists. The ten “new farmers” are portrayed as dual figures—both laborers and communicators. While cultivating the land through manual work, they simultaneously document and disseminate their labor processes via short videos, livestreams, and daily vlogs, collectively painting a vivid picture of contemporary rural

life. Through vlogs, these young people record their journey of learning agricultural skills. Livestreaming allows them to share their work processes and outcomes in real time, directly delivering agricultural products to consumers. These visual formats break away from the closed narratives of traditional variety shows, bringing rural life into the public eye in an authentic, immediate, and interactive manner. They not only showcase the diverse forms of agriculture in the new era but also present a new path for the younger generation to realize personal and social value in the countryside, attracting young audiences' attention to rural issues.

3.3. Cultural implications: new rural narratives and value transmission

The rural life depicted in this variety show starkly contrasts with previous romanticized, “utopian paradise”-style narratives of the countryside. Culturally, Let's Farm constructs a novel “new rural narrative” model centered on reconnecting land, labor, and youth. It carries traditional reverence for the land, nature, and collectivism while integrating contemporary expressions of technology, innovation, and individual growth. This breaks the monotony and stereotyping of traditional rural narratives, conveying new value recognition through audiovisual language. In this process, viewers strongly feel the hardship of labor and the joy of harvest, establishing emotional resonance.

Building on this foundation, the program further addresses the contemporary imperative of “rural revitalization.” The production team eschews mainstream celebrities, instead selecting ten “relatively unknown” young individuals to immerse themselves in rural life, thereby responding to societal concerns about the purpose of contemporary youth. With an average age of around 23, the participants are mostly young artists or recent graduates. For them, this “return to the land” is not an escape from urban life or a nostalgic romanticism. Returning to the countryside is no longer a “necessity” but a “choice”; agriculture is no longer seen as “backward” but as a path to “sustainable development.” Through their perspectives, the show explores the meaning of farming, giving rural cultural heritage a contemporary voice that sparks young people's imagination and interest in “returning to the countryside to start businesses.” The “non-elite” portrayal of youth is also key to the show's broad appeal. They neither deliberately “play the country bumpkin” nor indulge in pretentious artistry; instead, they connect with viewers as ordinary people, forming an equal and authentic emotional bond.

Unlike the direct, didactic approach of traditional mainstream cultural works, this program prioritizes allowing values to grow organically through viewers' emotional experiences. The emotional bond between the youth and the land extends to viewers' identification and projection. Many express their identification as “fellow farmers” through comments and social media, transcending passive viewing to become resonant participants. The dedication of Zhong Lin, a young man returning to his hometown to combat desertification, deeply moved viewers. This sincerity boosted sales of local premium agricultural products in subsequent episodes. This phenomenon exemplifies the construction logic of the “affective community” in communication studies, where media activates individuals' sense of belonging and participation at the cultural level through “empathic performance.”

In recent years, Let's Farm has been successfully nominated for the Magnolia Award at the 28th Shanghai Television Festival and was invited to participate in a professional symposium co-hosted by the National Radio and Television Administration and the China Television Arts Committee, leading the innovative trend in rural-themed content. It has not only resonated widely domestically but also transcended cultural differences, becoming an important window showcasing the new face of rural China to the world. Thus, Let's Farm has not only achieved innovative expression of rural

culture at the content level but also elevated the discursive influence of China's rural narratives in terms of cultural soft power.

4. Discussion

4.1. Communication advantages and limitations of rural documentary variety shows

General Secretary Xi Jinping emphasized that “In selecting Chinese stories for international dissemination, we should focus on seeking common symbols under the guidance of shared values, sparking broad emotional resonance to achieve the international expression and transmission of Chinese culture.” [9] Let's Farm avoids the visual pitfalls of past programs that either “consumed the countryside” or “mirrored nostalgia.” Instead, through a presentation that de-labels and de-spectacles rural life, it attempts to establish a “co-cultivating” viewing relationship. This approach transcends the urban-rural dichotomy narrative framework, strengthening emotional bonds between urban youth and rural culture—a significant step in building cultural identity. More crucially, the program leverages short videos and interactive comment streams to expand the reach of rural culture, granting it momentum for reproduction within social media spaces. Indeed, Let's Farm offers both a practical model and theoretical framework for disseminating rural culture.

Embedding educational functions within its variety show format, the program achieves “soft integration” through emotional and human-centered storytelling. This approach enhances viewer engagement while amplifying the transmission of cultural values, offering an effective pathway for rural culture dissemination and cultural soft power development within the new media landscape. Such rural documentary variety shows emphasize modern values like youth returning to the countryside, technology-assisted agriculture, collective striving, and a connection to the land. This resonates with China's “rural revitalization” strategy while aligning with a global trend of young people focusing on rebuilding primary industries.

Despite its innovative strengths in visual presentation and cultural dissemination, Let's Farm faces several limitations. First, as a mass entertainment product, its production remains driven by ratings, advertising revenue, and traffic metrics. Its documentary nature perpetually oscillates between commercial logic and authentic representation, with some scenes exhibiting tendencies toward excessive beautification or emotional exaggeration. When the boundary between documentary and entertainment blurs, it may distort public perceptions of rural realities and even trap cultural dissemination in “scenic” narratives, undermining social credibility. Second, such programs exhibit pronounced urbanization and youth-centric tendencies in audience targeting and aesthetic appeal. Their dissemination logic implicitly targets urban middle-class audiences, with “return-to-roots narratives” catering more to young urbanites' romanticized visions of rural life while often overlooking the acceptance levels of middle-aged and elderly demographics. Finally, content-wise, these programs primarily focus on labor processes and personal growth, failing to sufficiently explore the structural and institutional issues underlying agricultural systems. Filming locations are concentrated in economically developed areas with well-developed infrastructure, such as Hangzhou's West Lake District, while narrative emphasis avoids delving into real-world problems like land ownership rights, resource allocation, and urban-rural disparities. While this “de-regionalized” narrative strategy facilitates mainstream dissemination, it simplifies the complexity of rural China and diminishes the program's public engagement and critical perspective.

4.2. The shift in rural cultural expression in the new media context

Literary creation possesses subjectivity and transience, and literary works themselves present certain barriers to reading, thus limiting the dissemination of rural culture through literary means. In contrast, internet and digital technologies have created an entirely new ecosystem for cultural content production. Within this ecosystem, netizens are the dominant force in cultural content creation, with their content production, sharing, and clicks providing fundamental support to cultural content providers and operators [10]. These developments undoubtedly sustain cultural vitality. Consequently, the success of Let's Farm validates the public potential of entertainment programs in the digital media era: media is no longer merely a "transmission device" but a crucial arena for generating cultural meaning.

Thanks to the rapid advancement of digital technology and online platforms, the dissemination of rural culture has undergone a significant transformation. New media formats like short videos, film/TV variety shows, and live streaming have vastly expanded the pathways for expressing and receiving rural culture. For instance, Li Ziqi used short videos to create an idealized vision of Eastern pastoral life, successfully spreading traditional Chinese agricultural aesthetics on international platforms. Professor Chen Yi of Soochow University observes, "Li Ziqi skillfully sidesteps the modern operational system. Her videos offer a compelling fantasy for contemporary audiences—the laborer cultivating and cooking their own food, seemingly disconnected from the outside world, creating a self-sufficient, undisturbed utopia." [11] Similarly, intangible cultural heritage creators like Shan Bai and Nan Xiang leverage short videos to showcase traditional crafts, achieving a modern transformation of intangible cultural heritage. Rural-themed films and TV series such as *Longing for the Life*, *The River Flows East*, and *The Mountain and the Sea* collectively construct a diverse, multidimensional, and modern visual spectrum of rural China.

Not only has the form of dissemination changed, but the content focus of rural culture transmission has also shifted: from an early emphasis on idyllic depictions and nostalgic narratives, it has gradually turned toward socially conscious themes with contemporary relevance. While documenting the relationship between land and people, Let's Farm also shoulders the social responsibility of guiding public attention toward rural development and conveying positive labor values. This "content innovation" is no longer a one-dimensional, romanticized portrayal of rural life, but rather an interactive, constructive cultural practice with social mobilization power.

Effective cultural dissemination hinges on whether its symbols resonate with audience emotions and contemporary values. Themes like "youth growth," "technology coexisting with nature," and "collective striving" in Let's Farm carry universal cultural significance—they are shared human emotional symbols that help break down language barriers, enhance international reception, and ultimately shape a new image of China. Future rural narratives should transcend the binary oppositions of "traditional/modern" and "backward/advanced," instead showcasing the multifaceted reality of China's countryside. By highlighting the "new farmers" archetype, these narratives can dismantle the stereotype of China as merely a "traditional agricultural powerhouse."

5. Conclusion

For a long time, documentary-style variety shows in China's television landscape have often occupied a gray area between entertainment and documentary. However, the emergence of Let's Farm has brought a shift and breakthrough in the functional positioning of documentary variety shows. Research reveals that the value of Let's Farm has transcended the practical concerns of the "rural revitalization" strategy, awakening the public's spiritual reconnection with the "land" and

their “roots.” Let’s Farm can be regarded as an innovative model for disseminating rural culture within the new media landscape.

Of course, this study has certain limitations: First, the analysis of Let’s Farm is primarily based on personal observation and textual interpretation, lacking support from quantitative research methods such as questionnaires and statistical data. Second, it fails to assess the actual impact of Let’s Farm on audience perceptions, attitudes, and behavioral intentions from an effectiveness perspective, making it difficult to fully reflect its communication outcomes and social influence. Further integration of qualitative and quantitative research methods could be strengthened.

Future rural cultural dissemination requires more narrative innovations and technological integration grounded in real-world contexts. It must uphold the “authenticity” of cultural expression while expanding the “breadth” of communication pathways. In this process, rural documentary variety shows—as a medium that combines warmth and depth—hold promise as vital bridges connecting tradition and modernity, urban and rural areas, youth and the land, and the public at large.

References

- [1] Fei Xiaotong. (2005). *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society*. Beijing: Beijing Publishing House.
- [2] Li Zehou. (1999). *Four Essays on Aesthetics*. Anhui: Anhui Literature and Art Publishing House, pp. 463-465.
- [3] Huang Ziping, Chen Pingyuan, & Qian Liqun. (1986). On "Chinese Literature in the 20th Century". *Modern Chinese Literature Studies*, (01), 292-293.
- [4] Sun Zhili. (2002). *Literary Translation in China: From Domestication to Foreignization*. *Chinese Translators Journal*, (01), 39-43.
- [5] Ding Chao. (2019). *A Study on the Construction of Pseudo-environment in Slow Variety Shows* [D]. Shanghai International Studies University.
- [6] Ren Tingyi & Qin Junxiang. (2022). Rural Revitalization and Cultural Inheritance in the Dissemination of Documentary Images: An Observation on the Creation of Qingdao Local Cultural Documentaries in the New Era. *Contemporary TV*, (08), 64-68.
- [7] Huang Wen & Li Mengjie. (2023). Program Innovation and Social Value Return of Rural Variety Show Let's Plant. *Contemporary TV*, (12), 29-33.
- [8] Yang Changling. (2023). Let's Plant: Feeling the Breath of Soil in the Farming Scenery. *China Television*, (10), 84-86.
- [9] Compilation and Research Office of Party Literature, Central Committee of the Communist Party of China. (2017). *Selected Excerpts of Xi Jinping's Discourses on Socialist Cultural Construction*. Beijing: Central Literature Publishing House, p. 20.
- [10] Wang Shuang. (2016). *Research on the Internet and Cultural Production, Promotion and Consumption* [D]. Shandong University.
- [11] Chen Yi. (2021). On the Labor Aesthetics in the International Communication of Li Ziqi's Videos. *Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China)*, 43(08), 70-73.