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## From Confrontation to Integration: Changes of the Urban-Rural Relationship in China's Rural Movies in Social Transformation

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### Abstract

*This paper delves into the evolving portrayal of the urban-rural dynamic in Chinese rural films over the past four decades, set against the backdrop of China's profound social transformation. Our primary focus is on how the narrative shifts within Chinese rural cinema have both mirrored and shaped the broader socio-cultural changes accompanying China's urbanization process, thereby influencing the identities of rural inhabitants. To facilitate this exploration, we conduct a comparative analysis of two pivotal films: "Life" (1984) and "Coffee or Tea" (2020). Throughout this study, we pinpoint significant narrative transitions that mark this evolution, such as the shift from individuals "leaving hometowns" to "returning home," providing insight into varying levels of social status among villagers. Additionally, we observe a transformation in character portrayals from "runaway" figures to "new farmers," reflecting changing rural perspectives towards their places of origin. Moreover, there is a notable shift in value orientations from an emphasis on "individual struggle" to a focus on "common prosperity," showcasing the countryside's capacity to integrate new technologies and ideologies. These narrative transformations signal a shift in the urban-rural relationship, progressing from a state of opposition and division to one of integration and reconciliation. Concurrently, the identities of rural inhabitants undergo a transformation, shifting from a self-centered focus to one centered around their hometowns. This study not only offers valuable insights into rural narrative texts within the context of modernity narratives but also provides an in-depth exploration of contemporary Chinese rural cinema as an art form.*

**Keywords:** Chinese rural film, urban-rural narrative, transition, symbol, returning hometown, identity recognition

## 1. Introduction

Given that agriculture served as the cornerstone of China's development, rural areas stand as crucial microcosms of social and historical change. The urban-rural relationship holds a paramount position in China's national economic and social development system (Wang, Kong, & Xu, 2021). This structural dynamic of "urban-rural" also emerges as a prevailing narrative thread in the annals of Chinese rural cinema spanning the past century (Chen & Li, 2020). Beyond merely chronicling the country's socioeconomic transformation, this narrative motif also encapsulates scholars' interpretations of China's historical trajectory. The temporal evolution of this narrative motif vividly mirrors the intricate and profound changes in rural society.

Since the inception of Reform and Opening-up in 1978, China has undergone a genuine societal overhaul, heralding the onset of systemic social reform (Renmin Net, 2023). The conventional notion of "rural China" has dissolved, giving way to the emergence of "urban-rural China" as the novel social framework. Amidst this transition, the fluid movement of peasants between cities and villages has sculpted a "half-worker, half-farmer" structure within rural society. This predominantly peasant-driven framework not only underscores the autonomy of the peasant class but also imparts adaptability and resilience to China's social fabric, thus maintaining equilibrium during this transitional phase (Zhu, 2019). Despite the accessibility of rural-urban mobility, the lingering disparities in economic and cultural development between urban and rural spheres continue to circumscribe options and planning for rural residents. The chasm in social status widens, leaving rural inhabitants grappling with a sense of "fuzziness, uncertainty, and contradiction" in their self-identity (Hu, 2022). Concomitantly, issues such as population "hollowing out" and other obstacles detrimental to rural progress have come to the forefront. Given that "identity can be shaped through narrative and its reception" (Thunder, 2004), it becomes imperative to scrutinize the cinematic narrative.

According to Zhang (2018), the portrayal of urban-rural relationships in film arises from a multitude of factors, including policy, geography, economy, culture, population migration, and civilizational exchange. As the post-socialist era unfolded (from the 1980s to the present), Chinese media's representation of rural life underwent a gradual transformation. The prominence of villagers on both big and small screens gradually waned (Chen, 2016). Scholars attribute this shift to urbanization, the discourse of modernity, developmental logic, capital influence, and evolving tastes of urban audiences, especially with the influx of Hollywood films into China (Xie, 2016). In this context, image production continuously reinforces the city's position as the nation's primary media hub.

As a result, rural image production inevitably contends with urban "oversight" and experiences varying degrees of marginalization, gradually becoming a marginalized subject in media depictions (Liu, 2020). In recent years, China has introduced policies to foster rural development, such as "Rural Revitalization" (2017) and "Integrated Development of Urban-Rural Areas" (2018). This surge in rural-themed image production has captured the attention of academia. Yet, scholars exhibit greater interest in how social media, particularly peasants' self-produced short videos, empowers their discursive power. While artistic representation strategies in rural films and television have been thoroughly explored in constructing the collective memory of rural culture, research on the narratives of rural-urban relations and their evolution remains limited.

The artistic practice of Chinese rural cinema also encapsulates a distinct interplay between art and reality. The prevalent narrative themes of "leaving hometown" and "returning hometown" wield varying degrees of influence on the identity of Chinese villagers (Chen & Li, 2020). This inevitably arises as a focal point in the study of Chinese rural cinema. According to Taylor (2004), the dawn of modernity spurs the awakening of individual consciousness. In this phase of deconstructing past collective identities and yet to establish modern society's individual identity, such groups grapple with an identity crisis and may struggle to find a sense of belonging. Taylor contends that there exists an intimate connection between narrative and identity. Consequently, the question arises: what shifts

in urban-rural relations do rural films chronicle amid the grand transformation of contemporary Chinese society? How have these shifts impacted the identities of rural inhabitants across different epochs? These questions constitute the crux of this study.

To address this, the paper will first scrutinize the characteristics of Chinese rural cinema in terms of narrative cues and symbolic reproductions in depicting urban-rural relationships, while also cataloging creators' varied conceptualizations of this relationship across different eras. Subsequently, it will critically assess the impact of the evolving portrayal of rural inhabitants on the construction of their fluid, plural, and dynamic identities. This paper endeavors to investigate the evolving landscape of contemporary Chinese rural society through the lens of cinematic art, distinguishing itself from prior sociological examinations of rural issues. This inquiry extends beyond the creation of these texts to consider how ordinary Chinese villagers can actively contribute to the process of Rural Revitalization in the digital age. Ultimately, this paper offers a reflection on the shifting urban-rural dynamic within China's societal transformation, as illuminated by film narratives. It also provides an artistic representation, imagination, and interpretation of the evolving identity of rural inhabitants.

## 2. Literature Review of Chinese Rural Movies

In recent years, there has been a burgeoning body of literature in China dedicated to rural video content. However, the majority of media and cultural studies scholars have directed their focus towards short online videos and popular variety shows in the field. In contrast, rural cinema has largely remained overlooked. As per an extensive review of existing literature, the urban-rural relationship has been a persistent theme in Chinese cinema for well over a century (Ling, 2005). Despite its longstanding presence in the cinematic landscape, it has received limited attention as a dedicated research topic.

### 2.1 Century's Changing History of Rural Films in China

From the inaugural rural-themed film "Lian Hua Luo" in 1923 to the present day, this genre of art has spanned a century in China. Rural film narratives have meticulously documented and mirrored the evolution of countryside life from the modern era to contemporary times, encompassing both narratives of hardship and warmth, as well as narratives focused on culture and class (Chen & Li, 2020). However, the definition of "countryside" undergoes significant variation across different eras and contexts.

In the 1920s, rural films depicted the city and countryside as emblematic of "prosperity's vice" and "tradition's simplicity." For reformist filmmakers, this portrayal was a call for national pride and moral indoctrination. By the 1930s and 1940s, radical left-wing filmmakers recognized the political impact of cinema. They utilized works like "Spring River Flows East" (1947) to instill class and national consciousness in the population, aiming to achieve national liberation and establish power during the revolutionary period—a time when the Chinese Communist Party ultimately relied on peasant power, as epitomized by the "rural-urban encirclement" strategy. Films played a critical role in disseminating revolutionary consciousness. Even in the face of adversity, villagers in cities were depicted as kind-hearted, while cities were portrayed as harboring "evil" due to the presence of bureaucrats, capitalists, and hooligans. The moral mythology of early rural films, along with the dualistic urban-rural opposition, stemmed from these stark contrasts.

Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the dominant ideology of the country underwent a profound transformation. This shift in ideological framework also delineated the themes and content of rural cinema. Works from this era, like "Chaoyang Gou" (1963), portrayed a political movement where the urban population, primarily composed of intellectuals and the petty bourgeoisie, "went to the countryside" for education and reformation by workers, peasants, and soldiers—a movement known as the "Down to the Countryside Movement." Narratives of this "reverse rural migration" heightened the ideological opposition between urban (counter-labor) and

rural (labor) sectors, framing it within the broader context of counter-revolutionary and revolutionary discourses. The discourse of "devaluing the city and praising the countryside" reflected a time when the countryside held a socially superior position to the city in China.

In 1978, China initiated the "Reform and Opening-up" policy. This shift in policy led to a disproportionate allocation of resources towards cities, exacerbating the economic disparity between urban and rural areas. As the countryside experienced a process of "depoliticisation" (He, 2012), a new generation of filmmakers adopted a realist perspective to examine the profound changes taking place in rural areas due to societal transformation.

Films such as "The Old Well" (1986), "Qiu Ju Fights the Law" (1992), and "Blind Mountain" (2007) vividly expose longstanding social issues in rural China: mental ignorance, absence of legal protection, the dominance of local bullies, and educational backwardness, among others. While cities are often depicted as bastions of modernity and progress, the countryside is frequently portrayed as lagging behind, characterized by desolation and a stark absence of modern civilization (Liu Na, 2020). The urban-rural relationship depicted in these films still reflects an imbalance. Currently, the social and economic status of cities far surpasses that of rural areas.

Over the past decade, the government has made efforts to rectify the imbalance in urban-rural development, introducing strategies like "promoting the integration of urban-rural development" and "Rural Revitalisation." While the number of rural-themed films has diminished, those that do exist predominantly focus on the narrative of rural residents, particularly young intellectuals, who choose to return to the countryside. What emotional shifts underlie contemporary villagers' sentiments towards the countryside when making this decision? This is the key question that this essay will address.

## 2.2 *Narration of Urban-Rural Relationship: modern narration reflecting the transformation and changes of rural society*

Marx asserted that when urban-rural relations undergo change, society undergoes a corresponding transformation. Sociologists have long been intrigued by the dynamics of urban-rural relations. In China, the urban-rural relationship is described as a "universal connection and interaction that exists between urban and rural areas, characterized by interdependence, contradictions, mutual influence, and mutual constraints." It is deemed "the most significant relationship among various interests in China" (Wang Songde, 2014). This intricate dynamic finds vivid reflection in Chinese rural-themed cinema.

Following periods of moral indoctrination, national liberation, and class revolution, rural cinema in the post-socialist era adopted three distinct narrative forms: the portrayal of idyllic life in the countryside, moral persuasion amidst historical turbulence, and the depiction of urban-rural conflict during the process of modernization (Jia Leilei, 2008). These seemingly contradictory depictions of rural life convey creators' sentiments of yearning, nostalgia, regret, and a sense of helplessness towards the countryside.

According to scholar Zhang Yingjin (2007), "in the cultural imagination of modern China, the dichotomy between urban and rural landscapes emerges as one of the most frequently explored themes, marking a fiercely contested cultural production site—a space where conflicting discourses and values converge. This dichotomy is deeply entrenched in the minds of modern Chinese writers and filmmakers, both in terms of self-awareness and in the largely unconscious realm of everyday life." Consequently, the urban-rural relationship has evolved into a distinctive narrative motif within Chinese rural cinema, embodying a narrative tradition imbued with profound national cultural connotations (Zhang XY, 2018). This narrative tradition serves as the historical foundation underpinning the research conducted in this paper.

Scholars have discerned a connection between the fragmented discourse of the urban-rural narrative, unequal social status, and the discourse of 'modernity' through their examination of this narrative. A notable feature of Chinese modernity discourse is the use of the binary opposition of

"traditional/modern" to analyze Chinese societal issues (Hui & Karl, 1998). Williams (2014) associates the term "modern" with notions of development and progress. Conversely, its antithesis encompasses ideas of tradition, conservatism, and backwardness. Drawing from Western models, the pursuit of modernity, development, and progress constitutes a central objective in China's narrative of modernity. The most profound impact of this narrative on individual lives lies in the understanding that one can only realize their own life's value by integrating into the central discourse of the national modernity narrative. For rural residents, the primary pathway to engage in the larger narrative of national modernization is through urban migration. Consequently, in rural films, the contrasting elements of "tradition and modernity" in modernity discourse manifest as the binary opposition between "rural and urban" (Yan, 2014). Furthermore, the narrative of urban-rural relations evolves into a struggle between modernity and anti-modernity.

Past research has predominantly focused on the cinematic text, with a keen eye on its artistic portrayal of the conflicting relationship. The discursive aspects of urban-rural conflict have also been extensively explored. However, there has been a dearth of analysis regarding the sociological factors contributing to the evolving urban-rural relationship or studies on its cohesion. Moreover, recent efforts have been made in rural film practice to incorporate cues, symbols, and landscapes, serving as vehicles for conveying the contemporary discourse of urban-rural relations: themes of reconciliation, integration, and a return to one's countryside or hometown. Regrettably, the academic community has not yet afforded these recent developments the attention they warrant.

### 3. Method and Sample

To better scrutinize the chronological evolution of the urban-rural relationship, this paper selects "Life" (1984) (created during the early stages of Reform and Opening-up) and "Coffee or Tea" (2020) (made in the period of Rural Revitalisation) as subjects for comparative narrative analysis. Both films share a common narrative thread: they center around the journeys of young rural intellectuals navigating between the urban and rural landscapes. However, in "Life," the return to the countryside is a reluctant decision borne out of a failure to secure urban recognition, marked by the weight of urban power oppression and personal struggle. In contrast, "Coffee or Tea" portrays a return to the countryside driven by a genuine desire for it. While both films employ binary opposition symbols to illustrate the urban-rural relationship, the former emphasizes the contrast between these opposing elements, while the latter strives to dissolve these distinctions and underscores their potential for unity. As Zhao (2015) notes, "In the meaning of the symbol, any binary opposition is imbalanced, and there is always one side that is dominant over the other." Consequently, within the narratives of two markedly disparate imbalanced relationships, the two films construct entirely distinct portraits of rural inhabitants.

"Life" is hailed as "the quintessential return-to-hometown tale in contemporary cinema" (Chen & Li, 2020). The protagonist, Gao Jialin, returns to his village not only as a reluctant recourse after failing to establish urban identity, but also as the culmination of urban power dynamics and personal struggles. "Coffee or Tea" stands out in its interweaving of urban returnees, rural returnees, and the segment of the rural population left behind in the same setting, endeavoring to facilitate a reasoned discourse between the urban and rural realms through the conflicts and redemptions experienced by three young individuals. Both of these films unfold against the backdrop of a pivotal historical juncture in the transformation of Chinese rural society. Consequently, this paper will meticulously compare and contrast the narrative threads, characters, and symbols pertaining to urban-rural relations. Through this analysis, we aim to delineate the trajectory of urban-rural dynamics and, in turn, probe the influence of cinematic art on the reality of rural China..

### 4. Analysis

The movement of population between urban and rural areas serves as a key link between the city and the countryside, bringing the urban-rural relationship into sharp focus (Zhang, 2018). In Western

countries, rural-urban migrations dominated rural population movements throughout the modernization process. However, in mid-twentieth century China, a reverse population movement emerged, characterized by individuals moving "from city to countryside" due to the "Down to the Countryside Movement." After the conclusion of this movement in 1976, many intellectuals who had returned to cities began to engage in profound reflections on the realities of rural society. Cultural introspection and a quest for roots became central themes in the Chinese artistic landscape. It was within this context that filmmakers first gained a heightened awareness of the precarious position of rural society.

#### 4.1 Film "Life" (Dr. Wu Tianming, 1984): Narratives and Symbols

The film "Life," akin to many others of its era, provides a snapshot of rural society as it existed at the time. What sets it apart is its deliberate choice not to neatly resolve the conflict of character and identity within a singular rural backdrop. Instead, it centers the narrative on the protagonist's intricate journey through urban-rural spatial displacement, delving into their entanglements, confusion, and moments of hesitation (Xu, 2016). This shift in setting and circumstance leads to a diverse array of choices that significantly shape the development of the character's personality. Notably, the resolution of the conflict in "Life" departs from the simplicity and perfection often found in earlier rural films. Instead, it presents a multidirectional and intricately woven narrative, effectively capturing the tension inherent in an era of monumental change.



Figure 1: Action still for the film "Life"

**Story line.** "Life" chronicles the journey of the protagonist, Gao Jialin, as he experiences a cycle of "returning to his hometown, entering the city, and returning to his hometown again." Initially, Gao, as a rare highly educated individual in his village, secured a respectable teaching position. However, when his job was unjustly taken by the village chief's son, he found himself returning to farming in his hometown. Shortly thereafter, Gao's uncle assumed the role of director at the county labor bureau. Fearing to offend this high-ranking official, the village chief arranged for Gao to become a communication officer in the county committee. As a public servant in the county government, Gao earned the admiration and affection of an old classmate, Huang Yaping. When Huang suggested her father could arrange a job for him in Nanjing, a larger city, Gao decisively left behind his former girlfriend from his hometown, Liu Qiaozhen, and set off with Huang. However, Gao soon faced allegations of "illegal" employment, leading to his dismissal from the position. Upon his return to his rural hometown, he found that Liu, who had once deeply cared for him, had already married someone else.

**Character image.** Gao Jialin epitomizes the "pseudo-elite" of 1980s rural China. He embraces life with lofty goals and aspirations, distinct from the reserved nature of his father's generation, and



harbors greater spiritual ambitions. His transition from teacher to farmer is marked by a blend of resignation and confidence, while assuming a public official role seemingly reveals an underlying sense of inferiority. His character grapples with a poignant internal crisis, and the choices he confronts are deeply influenced by the prevailing factors of the time. Gao's decisive abandonment of Liu, his initial love, stands as a pivotal deviation from the original novel. According to the director, Gao's departure from the embodiment of genuine humanity represented by Liu in the traditional countryside signifies a complete "disconnection from his roots." In the film, Gao's father echoes this sentiment, asserting, "You should have planted your roots in our soil, but now you're like a bean sprout with no roots. You've forfeited your soul!" Rooted in the director's vernacular-based critique, Gao Jialin is depicted as a "heartless man" in the cinematic adaptation, embodying a character akin to "Julien" in contemporary China.

**Symbols of urban-rural relations.** The film employs "poetry" as a medium to both bridge and distinguish "city people" and "country people" in its visual portrayal of the dynamic between urban and rural environments. In a poem addressed to Gao, Huang, hailing from the city, utilizes the symbol of a free-spirited swan to kindle his pursuit of the "outside world." Conversely, when Liu, who lacked formal education, embarks on a lengthy journey to find him, their conversations center on mundane topics. The film then employs a sound montage technique, incorporating Gao's name in a nonlinear editing approach. "I wish you were a swan with wings, free to embrace every blue sky. Your pig gave birth to 12 piglets, but one perished, leaving 11... You are a swan/ your female pig... swan/female pig..." By ascribing distinct imagery to the waving geese and the wild sows, the film delineates "literate people" and "vulgar people," contributing to the emergence of a cultural divide or displacement between urban and rural domains. Gao Jialin, deeply immersed in the modern discourse of technology, ideals, and poetry, struggles to muster interest in the mundane details of a sow's litter count.

"Life" unveils the profound influence of modernity on traditional rural communities by tracing the movements of rural residents between contemporary urban spaces and rural locales. The rigidification of social stratification hinders returning intellectuals from seamlessly translating their cultural capital into political and economic gains. Gao's thwarted attempt to transition to the city lays bare the urban constraints on the social standing of rural areas, reflecting the filmmakers' pessimistic stance towards the progress of rural anti-modernity in the 1980s. Consequently, in the ensuing decades, "the intrinsic bond between individuals and their land gradually weakened, prompting a growing number of young people to seek greater prospects in urban settings" (Cai, 2021).

#### 4.2 *Coffee or Tea (Dr. Xu Hongyu, 2020): Narratives and Symbols*

In recent years, Chinese rural films have increasingly turned their attention towards exploring the dynamic between urban and rural environments. "Coffee or Tea" also delves into the theme of "returning hometown" as a central narrative thread. However, it distinguishes itself by not only featuring young rural residents who actively "return" or "stay" in their hometowns but also urban-educated youth who choose to "enter" the countryside. This multiplicity of storylines injects a fresh impetus into the portrayal of urban-rural relations, highlighting the film's departure from the traditional discourse of urban-rural opposition.



Figure 2: Action still for the film "Coffee or Tea"

**Story line.** At the story's outset, Peng Xiubing, a courier, intervenes to save Wei Jinbei, an urban entrepreneur on the brink of desperation, poised to leap from a building. Influenced by Peng, Wei resolves to depart Beijing and join him in Yunnan, Peng's hometown, to actualize his fresh business concepts. However, in the remote tea village, Peng's online shopping venture incurs significant losses. Turning to an old childhood friend, Li Shaoqun, a literary enthusiast deeply invested in coffee cultivation in the countryside, Peng seeks assistance. Leveraging his expertise in e-commerce, Wei swiftly propels Li's coffee into major cities. Subsequently, an international coffee company attempts to acquire their plantation at a substantial sum. Recognizing that the six-million offer aims to erase the distinctive mountain flavor, Li declines the proposal. In a fit of pique, Wei returns to the capital, yet finds himself grappling with the same work-related stress and sleep disturbances as before. However, he swiftly retraces his steps back to the tea village, this time with the resolute intent never to leave again. The revitalized collaboration among the trio not only paves the way for branding their hometown coffee but also heralds a turning point for the tea village, grappling with sluggish sales. Ultimately, Li, previously misunderstood by his father, the village chief, earns his father's rightful acknowledgment.

**Character image.** Peng Xiubing, the returning villager, embodies the quintessential archetype of the modern rural dweller in China. His motive for leaving the countryside differs from that of Gao Jialin; it is not about distancing himself from it, but rather about a meaningful return to contribute to his community. Peng exudes a perpetual optimism and shoulders a profound sense of responsibility towards his surroundings. On the other hand, Li Shaoqun, a fellow rural inhabitant, presents as a lofty intellectual who relishes solitude. Preferring the seclusion of the mountains, he resists the time-honored farming traditions upheld by both his father and his hometown, dedicating himself to the cultivation of his beloved coffee. Compared to Peng, Li's sojourn in the countryside leans towards self-centeredness. The portrayals of these two individuals as unassuming villagers cast Wei Jinbei's opportunist persona in stark relief. Wei's approach to rural living stands in stark contrast to Gao Galin's. While Gao sought an escape from the countryside, Wei sought an escape from the city. The countryside not only alleviates Wei's insomnia, anxiety, and other "urban ailments," but it also unveils new professional avenues for him. As a result, the evolving economic dynamic among these three men, shifting from confrontation to collaboration, exemplifies the potential for economic integration between urban and rural areas.

**Symbols of urban-rural relations.** Tea and coffee not only symbolize tradition and modernity, but also embody the essence of Eastern and Western cultures, reflecting the distinctive lifestyles of different generations. The allure of "Pu'er coffee's" distinctive "mountain taste" has captured the taste buds of urban consumers, underscoring a mutual "tolerance" between the urban and rural domains. The surge of e-commerce and online media further demonstrates the gradual dissolution of geographical and spatial boundaries between urban and rural areas. These two symbols in the film



serve not only to contrast urban and rural landscapes but also to illustrate the younger generation's departure from and transformation of tradition, implying the potential for reform. Moreover, as "Pu'er coffee" ventures into the global market via e-commerce, it radiates a sense of national and cultural confidence. Here, tradition and modernity collide, giving rise to a novel urban-rural dynamic where the countryside finds solace from the economic and spiritual pressures of the city.

"Coffee or Tea" unveils the profound impact of modern technology on traditional rural spaces, as rural individuals traverse between contemporary urban settings and their ancestral rural landscapes. It conveys the mainstream media's sanguine outlook on rural revitalization. In this new era, both urban and rural residents have a broader spectrum of autonomous mobility options. The film breaks free from a single narrative that solely examines rural issues from an urban standpoint, delivering a resounding message: China's rural areas have now become a land of opportunity for young individuals to forge their careers, offering a promising future to anyone willing to seize it.

## 5. Discussion

These two films, "Life" from 1984 and "Coffee or Tea" from 2020, provide snapshots of rural society at different junctures in China's post-socialist period. The rural landscape evolves from being perceived as the "shackles of backwardness," which intellectuals from the village sought to break free from, into an "ideal place" capable of not only assuaging the spiritual disquiet of urbanites but also contributing to the urban economy. This transformation has reshaped the urban-rural dynamic, enabling contemporary villagers to transcend their erstwhile marginalized status within the framework of the modernity narrative. It has forged a distinct identity for rural development protagonists, and ushered in a more varied narrative style infused with humor and youthful exuberance.

### 5.1 *Change in narrative thread: from leaving hometown to returning hometown-transfer of identity symbol*

The transition of the protagonist from "leaving hometown" to "returning hometown" not only alters the trajectory of the story and actions, but also showcases contemporary creators' evolving perception of rural space (Chen & Li, 2020).

Gao's fervent pursuit of leaving the rural area encapsulates a broader process of dissociation for young rural intellectuals: a quest for individual distinction and a questioning of established values. A successful "escape" signifies a multi-dimensional transformation of the original identity: firstly, a shift in social identity, progressing from a manual laborer reliant on nature to a knowledge-based mental worker, eventually attaining the status of a societal elite. Secondly, a transition in political identity, involving a shift from a collective builder in the rural setting to an individual contributor in the city, culminating in joining a loosely connected collective marked by greater mobility and fewer emotional attachments to clan and region. Thirdly, an evolution of economic identity, from a self-reliant, conservative operator to a passive participant in the market economy, and ultimately integration into an "advanced" society where marketization and commercialization continue to advance. Finally, a transformation of cultural identity, transitioning from a conservative adherent of traditional collective life to a consumer culture enthusiast, and ultimately assimilation into the ideology of advocating liberalism.

The fervent desire for change represented a universally realistic aspiration for rural youth at the time. However, the paradox of historical and ethical values led their life choices to often grapple with the "dilemma" between individual self and traditional ethics. This not only marks the onset of China's consumption era but also indicates that the promotion of China's economic prowess and cultural influence was still in its nascent stages (Zhang, 2023).

The primary factors compelling Gao's escape are evident in the lower socioeconomic class, limited opportunities, challenging economic conditions, and a lack of avenues for talent placement. To transform Gao's return from passive to active, it becomes imperative for rural areas to establish

the fundamental prerequisites that can overcome these limitations and enable the realization of individual values.

In the case of "Coffee or Tea," Peng Xubing's purpose for rural-to-urban migration was initially to bring back advanced technologies to his hometown. Furthermore, his dream extended beyond personal improvement; it aimed to uplift the entire Huanglu village out of poverty. Unlike Gao, who grappled with contradictions, Peng consciously "de-mystified" the city, successfully resisting its material temptations.

In the film, Peng delivers a passionate speech at the radio station: "Half of the 1,600 people in Huanglu Village work outside the village. There isn't a single complete family in the village, with more left-behind children and elderly people. Let's transition to coffee farming together and develop the industry of Huanglu Village, so that no family is separated!" This statement highlights the current phenomenon of the rural population "hollowing out," where young and middle-aged individuals work in cities while the elderly and children remain in their hometowns, resulting in long-term separation of family members. The film regards achieving a "complete home" as the ultimate goal of returning, interpreting the narrative discourse and sociological significance of "urban-rural integration." This not only deconstructs the city's perception as a "distant place from home," but also reconstructs the "endogenous motivation of rural economic development" (Guangming Net, 2022). More business opportunities will arise when people return to live.

The director artistically portrays the typical image of the new generation of young villagers through Peng and Li. They consciously choose to "de-urbanize," discovering the beauty of the countryside along with business opportunities that the city cannot easily replace. They possess technical skills and a sense of win-win (for example, after assisting Li in achieving initial success in the coffee business, Peng transitions to his profession, establishing the village's first express delivery business), and they can develop the entire village into active participants. From a procedural standpoint, it appears that Gao's desired lifestyle is gradually realized in the cases of Ebeng and Li. However, whether as a result of the process or outcome, the pursuit of personal values by the new generation of young intellectual peasants fundamentally differs from Gao's. Gao's understanding of peasants as "laggards," "discriminated against," and "bullied" is transformed in the views of Peng and Li into "autonomous and proud builders." Consequently, the film achieves a reconstruction of farmers' identities.

## 5.2 *Changes of power relations: from clan community to interest community-the disintegration of "guanxi society"*

In the 1980s, rural society in China adhered to the traditional survival principle of an "acquaintance society" or "guanxi." This greatly constrained the breadth of options, whether it be the detachment or integration of rural and urban living spaces. In rural China, people were deeply rooted in the land, self-reliant, and had established a collective "guanxi" society, constituting a stable social structure in traditional China (Fei, Hamilton, and Zheng, 1992). "During the initial stages of the reform and opening up period, due to the inertia of a series of political movements, China's overall society and ideology did not undergo significant qualitative changes over time" (Xu, 2016). Therefore, when Gao attempted to voice his grievances to the village chief, his parents strongly discouraged him, fearing potential repercussions for their future livelihoods. However, when Gao's identity as the "chief's nephew" accidentally came to light, the village head's demeanor towards him immediately shifted. Behind this "identity" lay a complex web of status and power hierarchies. Although Gao held a disdain for this "man-made" power, he reluctantly became complicit in it once he reaped its benefits. Yet, in a town governed by the rule of law, the reliance on "relations" was evidently precarious. When he was reported by the mother of his romantic rival, his uncle, who held a high-ranking position in the Labor Bureau, personally issued his dismissal. Neither the village chief nor his new girlfriend intervened to assist him, indicating a prevailing interest in power and status. This film portrays the power dynamics in rural society during that period: despite a strong desire to break free from their

stagnant existence, the villagers were powerless to overcome the substantial "guanxi" barrier between tradition and modernity, struggling to adapt to the urban legal system.

The transformation of the villagers' circumstances and their relationship with power is markedly evident in "Coffee or Tea." Take, for example, Li Shaoqun, who, despite being the son of the rural chief, displays indifference to the significance of "guanxi," a factor of considerable import during Gao's era. Within traditional Chinese families, the father assumes an authoritative role, embodying an influential voice that commands respect. The consanguineous structure of the clan, with the father at its helm, constitutes a cornerstone in the enduring framework of patriarchal society and its institutions (Liu, 1983). Consequently, when Li introduced coffee plants into a region steeped in generations of Pu'er tea cultivation, his father reproached him for "neglecting his forebears." When Peng fervently sought out Li, his father brusquely asserted that his son had "perished." It is apparent that Li's father, akin to Gao's father, remains resolute, traditional, and resistant to change. Nevertheless, as the coffee industry drives economic prosperity in their tea-centric village, father and son ultimately reconcile. In this instance, the familial community, nourished by shared blood ties, evolves into a productive community, bound by mutual economic interests. This transformation underscores the pivotal role of economic standing in fortifying the village's discourse power.

While conventional wisdom often attributes the difficulty in intergenerational communication to the younger generation's rebellion, Margaret (1987) posits that this arises from the reluctance of the older generation to adapt to the changing era. She contends that "authentic communication should entail a dialogue." Ultimately, the father and son sit at the same table, pouring coffee or tea for each other. Their interaction progresses from opposition to active reconciliation and mutual understanding, culminating in shared smiles that dispel all lingering resentments. At this juncture, the prevailing image of the fatherly archetype in Chinese rural literature undergoes a complete reconfiguration. Moreover, the father expresses a desire to become his son's "partner," demonstrating a willingness to learn how to cultivate coffee from him. This transition signifies not only a shift in dominant and non-dominant cultural dynamics, but also heralds a novel approach to sustaining intergenerational relationships. The intergenerational chasm between father and son gradually dissipates in the course of their dialogue, paving the way for a reconciliation of family-oriented identities.



**Figure 3:** At the end of the film, father and son sit down and share a cup of coffee and Pu-er tea.

### 5.3 *Changes of characters: the disappearance of "fugitives" and the rise of "new farmers"-the transition of mainstream discourse*

Over time, Gao's decision to leave the countryside and his initial love, as depicted in "Life," was initially viewed as "ungrateful." However, as societal values evolved, the creators' perspective on such choices underwent a significant shift. Similar scenarios are portrayed in films like "Nuan" (2003) and

"Mountains May Depart" (2015). Yet, during this era, "leaving/abandonment" was increasingly regarded as a conventional (albeit somewhat regrettable) life decision. The narrative's focus shifted away from moral judgments, aiming instead to illustrate the villagers' sense of nostalgia and deep attachment to their homeland. The discourse surrounding the identity of these "fugitives" receded, eclipsed by the overarching theme of "hometown nostalgia." Departing one's place of origin emerged as a customary option in pursuit of a more progressive life, while separations became integrated into the normalized ebb and flow of emotions.

**Participate in rural construction : from passive to active.** In recent years, a noticeable shift in character archetypes has emerged in rural films, with the introduction of "returners," primarily young intellectuals. Unlike their predecessors, these returnees no longer bemoan the social issues within rural communities. Instead, they actively seek to delve into the internal motivations driving hometown development. Socially, aspiring rural intellectuals returning with entrepreneurial ambitions are emerging as the new middle-class figures in rural areas, positioning themselves as pivotal contributors to rural economic progress. This transformation in perception—from individuals like Gao to figures like Peng—reflects a shift in the label "returnee" from one associated with "failure" to that of a "reformer."

The emergence of "new farmers," embodied by Peng and Li, underscores a heightened sense of belonging and responsibility towards their community, coupled with a newfound autonomy in shaping their life paths. As their social status becomes less marginalized, they embody the central figures driving rural development in this new era (Lu & Li, 2020). On the other hand, Wei, characterized as a "city civilian entering the countryside," presents a different facet of the "new farmer." In contrast to portrayals of poverty alleviation officials, Wei's deliberate relinquishment of his urban elite status and the spiritual solace he discovers in the countryside depict the city's active interdependence with rural areas in a non-heroic manner. Compared to Gagarin, these new farmers display less hesitance and greater autonomy, independence, and fearlessness. They share the urban experiences that Gao yearned for, yet opt for "returning to their hometowns" rather than pursuing a potentially improved life in the city..

**Labor symbol:from hoes, pens to fingers.** In traditional Chinese agricultural production, wielding a hoe and tilling the land serve as the primary means of physical expression and represent typical labor symbols. These actions constitute the film's central physical narrative, establishing the inherent physical attributes of rural residents. For instance, when Gao is queried about why he didn't attend school, the camera employs a stark contrast in body language: Gao, burdened by a hefty load of firewood, is depicted stooping under its weight. In contrast, the other individual appears to stand more upright. This visual juxtaposition suggests a shift in status, as Gao transitions from a teacher in town to a farmer in the countryside (Fig. 4, left). Subsequently, when Gao assumes the role of a "public servant" in the city, his tool of trade shifts from a hoe to a pen (Fig. 4, right). This alteration in equipment positions Gao at the apex of the image. Viewers, conditioned to scan frames from top to bottom, perceive the now-straight-backed Gao as "superior" to his rural friends who visit him in the city (Fig. 5, left). However, when he is later dismissed and encounters the driver once more, the two figures are aligned on the same horizontal plane (Fig. 5, right). This visual hierarchy of bodies is employed to convey distinct levels of status.

Conversely, in "Coffee or Tea," aside from a scene featuring three individuals carrying baskets into the mountains, there is a conspicuous absence of fieldwork. The film sidesteps the process of planting and harvesting coffee beans, and instead, centers its narrative on online sales as the focal point of economic development. The distinction between rural and urban denizens is no longer contingent on whether they wield "hoes" or "pens." The new generation of farmers can oversee production and market their products with just their "fingers." This shift signifies that migrant farmers are emancipated from factories and have returned to the fields, liberating their bodies from the regimentation and control of industrial environments, and reconnecting with nature. Traditional "labor aesthetics" featured in conventional vernacular literature progressively recede from the screen,

while the class boundaries distinguishing urban and rural elites begin to blur. Additionally, their attire exhibits even less distinction (Fig. 6).



**Figure 4:** Gao with a bundle of firewood on his back and Gagarin with a pencil



**Figure 5:** Gao appears to be "one-upmanship" his fellow villagers at the top of the image; when he loses his job, he returns to a "equal" position with them.



**Figure 6:** With the exception of some differences in dialectal accents, the three young people in "Coffee or Tea" are no longer distinguishable by their appearance.



**Forms of language: from Mandarin to dialect.** In the dialogue of "Life," regional characteristics were consciously avoided. All characters were dubbed in standard Mandarin, reflecting the prevalence of urban mainstream culture. Conversely, in "Coffee or Tea," dialects were purposefully employed to denote regional identities and evoke comedic effects. Peng conversed in his native Yunnan dialect, imbuing the characters with a more down-to-earth quality. Li, exuding an artistic aura, spoke in a slightly unpolished non-standard Mandarin, occasionally even reciting elusive poetry. Language, particularly dialects, constitutes a fundamental component of self-identity. It represents an intangible boundary that is less arbitrary than regionalism and less exclusionary than ethnicity (Manuel, 2003). The incorporation of dialects, emblematic of indigenous populations, underscores the current cultural sensitivity of rural films towards their native tongues. This approach also mirrors the inclusive and receptive stance of film culture, representing urban culture, towards rural traditions.

The transformations in the characters not only signify the villagers' positive affirmation of their own worth, but also exemplify the portrayal of China's "new farmers" in Rural Revitalization-themed films: individuals who are unafraid to experiment, eager to acquire knowledge, and adept at understanding market dynamics (Xinhua Net, 2019). The director's portrayal of contemporary rural life reflects the convergence of urban and rural denizens in terms of appearance, skills, and forms of labor. However, distinctions persist in terms of language style and adherence to traditional customs. Whether in terms of narrowing the economic gap with the urban economy or preserving cultural heritage, villagers exhibit a blend of tradition and independence. They are no longer passive recipients but instead actively employ various online media to construct meaning, thereby shaping their identities. In the dialogue of "Life," regional characteristics were consciously avoided. All characters were dubbed in standard Mandarin, reflecting the prevalence of urban mainstream culture. Conversely, in "Coffee or Tea," dialects were purposefully employed to denote regional identities and evoke comedic effects. Peng conversed in his native Yunnan dialect, imbuing the characters with a more down-to-earth quality. Li, exuding an artistic aura, spoke in a slightly unpolished non-standard Mandarin, occasionally even reciting elusive poetry. Language, particularly dialects, constitutes a fundamental component of self-identity. It represents an intangible boundary that is less arbitrary than regionalism and less exclusionary than ethnicity (Manuel, 2003). The incorporation of dialects, emblematic of indigenous populations, underscores the current cultural sensitivity of rural films towards their native tongues. This approach also mirrors the inclusive and receptive stance of film culture, representing urban culture, towards rural traditions.

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5.4 Changes in identity: from selfhood to homelandhood-the reconstruction of identity



**Figure 7:** Agricultural workers who have returned home for employment in "Coffee or Tea".

Hall (1990) posited that "identity/identification in sociology is the construction and result of the interaction between people, mechanisms, and practices." Identity constitutes a discursive practice, subject to the continual "play" of history, culture, and power dynamics. Secondary identities, particularly those of marginalized subaltern groups, play a pivotal and destabilizing role in the existence of dominant identities within this process. Given their inherently contradictory nature, such identities challenge the unified and stable structure of prior identities. The awakening of contradictory consciousness within the villagers' identities, as exemplified by Gao Galin, can be viewed as a rebellion against the individual consciousness obscured by social class struggles in the 1950s and 1970s. By the 1980s, Chinese villagers came to realize their secondary, marginalized, and socially disadvantaged position within the country.

In a similar vein, "Coffee or Tea" also grapples with the dilemma of social status, seeking to dismantle the exclusive "dividends" enjoyed by urbanites alone. The film empowers Li and Peng with advanced knowledge and technology, thereby challenging the dominance of urban discourse. It grants them the fortitude to assert themselves against Wei without yielding, leading to a "win-win" cooperation steered by the villagers. The narrative portrays the process of urban and rural residents gaining equal access to shared capital and resources, buoyed by both policy support and the burgeoning strength and confidence of the villagers. The director orchestrates a scene in which a group of real villagers loudly declare their return home: "My name is... I used to work in the city..." Through this ritualistic proclamation, the director conveys a persuasive intent: urban and rural areas can offer similar life prospects and even rural areas may present greater opportunities. This approach fully realizes the value of the villagers' subjectivity and constructs a profound sense of hometown identity.

From the perspective of individual endeavors, "Life" serves as a poignant reflection of the enticements that accompany social transformation for contemporary rural youth, as well as the personal quandaries that arise between the allure of modern civilized life and the warmth of traditional morality. Gao's struggles predominantly revolve around his own aspirations, seemingly without much consideration for the feelings of his family or romantic interests. While the film's intended protagonist is Liu, Gao harbors a disliking towards her. This rural woman, proficient in farming yet lacking in literacy, not only proves incapable of aiding his ascent, but inadvertently becomes an impediment in his path. Faced with this reality, the film conveys a subtle undercurrent of melancholy. Gao's moral critique also reflects the creator's tacit appraisal of Enlightenment modernity, while Liu's portrayal exemplifies the creator's fixation on and attachment to the benevolent humanity of the traditional social moral paradigm. This enlightened gesture and critical stance embody a mode of moderation, conservatism, and transition. However, the relentless march of

modern civilization and its irreversible impact on traditional values remain an inescapable reality.

In "Coffee or Tea," personal struggles are elevated by a profound sense of responsibility towards the development of his hometown. Pang perceives the poverty, underdevelopment, and isolation of his hometown not as reasons to depart, but as opportunities for transformation. According to Lu and Li (2022), "I" have a considerable degree of freedom of choice because this is "my" hometown. Consequently, the emotional connection of new farmers to their hometowns has transitioned from mere sentimental attachment to practical engagement. The cultural significance of hometowns has likewise evolved from "nostalgia" to the redefined concept of "my zone, my rule." Additionally, the influence of new media platforms and international transactions has reshaped the modern rural landscape, showcasing the myriad possibilities afforded by emerging technologies in driving rural revitalization. When confronted with an international company's proposition to purchase a tea plantation and standardize the flavor, Wei views it as a golden financial opportunity. In contrast, Li apprehends that this would obliterate the unique "mountain taste" that defines their hometown, and thus rejects the offer. The clash between Wei and Li encapsulates the conflict between utilitarianism, commonplace in the urban realm, and the enduring interests rooted in a sense of familial and national belonging. Following his return to Beijing to resume work, Wei, now selling coffee in a café, encounters a customer with a discriminatory regional attitude: "I don't drink Chinese coffee. Is Yunnan's coffee even worthy of being called coffee?" - This derisive remark, directed at Yunnan, a region lacking affluence, reflects a disdain for its coffee. This incident profoundly incites a determined Wei to embark on a second journey to the countryside. This illustrates that active hometown return is not solely a personal and emotional matter, but can also be interpreted as a choice aligned with national interests.

The evolving values of these "reverse" migrants pave the way for villagers to forge a renewed self-identity within the socio-cultural context of rural life. The narrative space maintains its duality, but it is Wei from the city who grapples with the contrast, not Peng and Li from the countryside. The customary political and capitalist dominance of the urban social system is rendered impotent in the face of the new farmers, driven by a sense of national pride as their coffee brand gains global prominence. United under the banner of "home-state isomorphism," they find reconciliation. This imbues contemporary Chinese youth, navigating the currents of globalization, with a spiritual resonance, compelling them to reconsider the fate of the individual and the collective. It prompts a reawakening of collective identity, centered on the pursuit of shared prosperity within the narrative framework of youth discourse.

## 6. Conclusion

The evolving narratives in these two films serve as poignant reflections of the contrasting ideals and realities experienced by two distinct generations of young villagers, offering insight into the profound shifts characterizing China's contemporary social transformation. "Life" (1984) stands as a fervent critique of the traditional agrarian civilization epitomized by vernacular spaces, juxtaposed against a profound yearning for the modernity embodied by urban environments. This underscores the prevailing negative disposition towards the rural cultural imagination held by the elite class of directors during that era. Conversely, in "Coffee or Tea" (2020), the tensions between individual autonomy and traditional moral codes, as well as between tradition and modernity, gradually dissolve in the face of the proactive endeavors of new farmers who vie for urban resources and challenge the dominance of urban discourse. Additionally, the involvement of online media in shaping the narrative of the contemporary countryside in the new era dismantles former geographical boundaries between urban and rural domains, culminating in the emergence of a redefined rural landscape. These narrative shifts unveil a multifaceted truth about Chinese rural cinema and the dynamics of rural society.

The transformations evident in Chinese rural cinema offer profound insights into the complex and reciprocal dynamics between urban and rural spheres within the context of contemporary

China's social evolution. These shifts also illuminate the contrasting ideals and realities experienced by two distinct generations of young rural intellectuals. Firstly, in terms of the portrayal of farmers, the narrative of returning to one's hometown, embodied by the proactive stance of "new farmers" who return to their villages with a determination to instigate transformation, signifies a resounding affirmation of their self-identity and an active pursuit thereof. This marks a departure from the prevalent depiction of "runaways" that frequented screens over the past century, heralding a new discourse of identity. Their heightened sense of subjectivity arises from their independent vocational choices, the dismantling of power barriers, the reorientation towards their hometowns, and the reimagining of symbolic elements such as father, hometown, and physical representation. As a result, they emerge as the vanguards of a new middle class, taking on the mantle of protagonists and reconstructing their dignified identities. Secondly, on an artistic level, these innovative practical forays have led to a reimagining of the aesthetic landscape of Chinese rural cinema, giving birth to what is now termed "New Mainstream Cinema" (Yin & Liang, 2018). In contrast to earlier politically-driven or commercially-oriented films, the new mainstream cinema places emphasis on individual perspectives, national sentiment, and identity exploration. It achieves a seamless integration of mainstream values with a popularized national identity narrative. This emergence signifies a fusion of mainstream discourse with the demands of the popular market, solidifying its position as one of the most significant cinematic and cultural phenomena in contemporary China. The artistic portrayal of rural settings in this new mainstream cinema of rural themes conveys a deeper layer of values centered on freedom, equality, fairness, and justice. By foregrounding economic agency, it transcends previous limitations associated with narratives primarily rooted in nostalgic sentiment towards the countryside. This not only effectively responds to the public's yearning for tangible realities and spiritual fulfillment, but also establishes a popular film genre capable of resonating with audiences beyond the agrarian landscape.

The transformations observed in Chinese rural society offer several noteworthy insights. Firstly, there is a heightened sense of agency among intellectual townspeople in actively participating in the development of rural areas. Historically, Chinese villagers, constrained by their education, social status, and household registrations, have faced limited career prospects and occupied a lower rung on the social ladder. This has hindered their ability to break free from the confines of predetermined life paths, particularly due to a lack of access to modern knowledge and the absence of social capital. Consequently, Gao Jian's transition from a teacher to a farmer represented not only a departure from his established professional identity, but also a definitive commitment to a particular trajectory. The designation of "peasant" carries connotations of enduring agricultural labor and the prospect of a modest livelihood. Remaining in the countryside, compounded by the absence of a robust rural welfare system encompassing healthcare, education, and employment, can lead to a loss of agency over one's own destiny, perpetuating a cycle of generational repetition. Individuals endowed with considerable talent and ambition are unlikely to be content with a life solely as farmers. While Gao's eventual defiance of this fate proved unsuccessful, this generation of villagers, more so than their predecessors, began to cultivate a sense of self-worth in their pursuit of propriety. Moreover, the moment one sets aside the pursuit of poetry to take up a hoe upon returning to their hometown, it serves as a poignant reflection of the mounting frustrations, disconnection, insecurity, and disenfranchisement experienced by those at the lower rungs of the social hierarchy in the wake of China's advancing commodification. Villagers have not only ceded control over their means of subsistence, but also over their preferred lifestyle and customary inclinations, initially eroded by the surge of consumerism (Ye, 2012). Under such circumstances, even if they manage to detach themselves from their original village community, seamless integration into the state, city, and market remains a formidable challenge (Zhang, 2013). Consequently, villagers grapple with a multitude of contradictions and complexities in forging their individual identities.

Furthermore, the prevailing narrative of urban-rural dynamics, once characterized by "binary opposition," has gradually given way to the concept of "urban-rural integration." This transition is exemplified by the gradual waning of the 1980s economic paradigm, which prioritized the city as the

locus of development through policies of urban growth at the expense of the countryside. Instead, the focus has shifted towards positioning rural areas at the forefront of new economic initiatives, fostering a climate of "win-win cooperation" with urban centers. As articulated by Peng Xiubin in the film, "We should not only bring things from outside into our hometown, but also take things from our hometown out." Concurrently, the narrative has relocated the dual imperatives of economic and spiritual advancement from rural to urban locales, encapsulating the communicative objective of elevating the status of rural areas vis-à-vis urban centers, aiming to rectify previous imbalances in their societal standing. However, this emergent "celebration of the countryside" does not entail a diminishment of urban influence, but rather encourages an integrated approach to growth. The concept of "urban-rural integration" has garnered support from governmental bodies and is further facilitated by the advent of new communication technologies, effectively dismantling previously entrenched social hierarchies. In this process, villagers return from the "outside world" to their "hometown," effecting a shift in the rural economy from one reliant on external assistance to a stance of self-sufficiency. This transformation propels a shift in identity from passivity to an active pursuit of personal values. The narrative underscores the significance of the body as both a productive and symbolic entity, amplifying universal values such as the inherent beauty of labor. Simultaneously, the ethical underpinnings of the traditional family structure, once rooted in "patriarchy," are evolving towards a "household economy orientation."

It is important to acknowledge that, despite the appearance of a thriving rural economy driven by the internet market in the new agricultural paradigm, it has not entirely escaped the singular function of "serving the city." The inherent nature of rural economic production still requires further exploration. Moreover, as rural spaces are instrumentalized to assuage the anxieties and uncertainties of urbanites, they become a supplementary entity that fulfills specific needs and acts as an extension of the city. Rural areas continue to serve as a resource pool, both in terms of material and emotional provisions, especially for urban centers (Lu & Li, 2022). This dynamic underscores that, even in the midst of modernization, rural areas are still perceived as a domain for the city to extract resources. In this manner, the Utopian portrayal of rural spaces tends to overly embellish and idealize the substantial challenges faced by rural society. This can lead audiences to overlook critical questions and reflections concerning the authentic rural landscape, ultimately transforming rural spaces into vessels filled with urban-centric content.

In summary, the ongoing process of modernization will persist, alongside the continued juxtaposition and interaction between urban and rural domains, as well as the spatial mobility of rural populations. To foster a more effective dissemination of rural culture and to construct identities more effectively through rural cinema, it is imperative to maintain the unique attributes of rural narratives while concurrently evolving in harmony with mainstream and Western cultural influences in a pluralistic and integrated manner. However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this chapter's research. While the film employs idealized narratives to amplify the voices of villagers in exercising their discursive power, the economic development across rural China remains uneven. The film's capacity to rectify the overall discursive plight of villagers and challenge the long-standing prejudices they face remains a formidable task. Furthermore, the depiction of rural areas in new cinematic works tends to be highly homogenized. Key issues that hinder rural residents from returning to their hometowns, such as education and elderly care, are largely overlooked. Thus, there is a need for further assessment and investigation into the extent to which cinematic art can activate the desire to return and influence individuals' practical choices.

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