

The Production of Beauty and Nostalgia: The Image-Space and Discursive Construction of Chinese Rural Documentaries in the New Era

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Abstract

This study examines Chinese rural documentaries from the New Era. It uses Henri Lefebvre's theory of the production of space. It also employs Michel Foucault's discourse theory. These theories serve as the core analytical framework. The research explores how these documentaries use cinematic narrative techniques. Their goal is to construct the countryside as a meaningful space. This space is filled with ideas of "beauty" and "nostalgia." Finally, the study critically analyzes the discursive practices and ideological effects of this construction process. This study argues that the rural space depicted in Chinese rural documentaries is not a straightforward reflection of reality but an actively selective discursive "production". Based on Lefebvre's "spatial triad", the study firstly dissects how the physical space of rural areas is depicted as a landscape and as "picturesque", how the social space of rural areas is shaped by the subjectivity of "new rural residents" and communal relationships and how the cultural space of rural areas is emotionally anchored by conceptions of "home", "memory" and "history". Subsequently, the study analyzes the micro-strategy of narrative technique in detail and explores how the cooperation between visual rhetorics of shot scale (long shot/close-up), lighting and camera movement and auditory landscapes of voiceover narration and soundscapes collectively create an emotionally resonant and realistic rural imagery. Furthermore, the study discusses the macro-strategies of spatial juxtaposition and integration and analyzes how these strategies facilitate the incorporation of different kinds of rural spaces into a macro-narrative space concerning "Beautiful China" initiative and an "urban-rural community". In conclusion, through subtle spatial storytelling, Chinese rural documentaries in New Era successfully produce "beauty" and "nostalgia" as a dominant cultural discourse. This cultural discourse evokes the audience's emotional resonance, strengthens cultural identity and displays the achievements of rural revitalization. In essence, it is a cinematic practice that participates in the construction of national identity in New Era. This research not only offers a critical spatial and discursive analytical approach for the study of rural documentaries but also provides a representative case study for the analysis of representational mechanisms and ideological effects in contemporary Chinese mainstream culture.

Keywords: Chinese rural documentaries, production of space, discourse construction, beauty and nostalgia

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Origin

From "Documenting" the Countryside to "Producing" the Countryside Documentary film, once believed to be a cinematic mode that "records reality", acquires its authoritative position from its indexical relationship with the "real." But an unprecedented transformation is taking place in the cinematic narratives of rural areas in China:

documentary no longer refers to passively “documenting” a pre-existing objective rural reality but to an actively selective and creative “production” of a symbolic countryside that fits with the discourses of a certain era. The transformation from “documenting” to “producing” is the core starting point of this research.

In the New Era, with the grand narratives of “Rural Revitalization”, “Beautiful Countryside”, and the emotional narrative of “nostalgia”, the Chinese countryside portrayed in documentary films has taken on a new look that is highly aestheticized and emotionalized. Whether it is the beautiful natural scenery in *Chinese Villages*, the retrospective of historical context in *Remembering Nostalgia*, or the newly built modern houses in *A New Journey After Poverty Alleviation*, these images always converge on the themes of “beauty” and “nostalgia”. It is what they should not show but what they never fail to show. It is not the messy reality of the countryside but a “symbolic reality” which has been selected, polished, and even artistically processed.

This situation makes us wonder how it is that, through their audiovisual codes and narrative logic, documentary films mould the hybrid and multidimensional experience of the countryside into an experience of “beauty” and “nostalgia” that is so cohesive and powerful? This is precisely the core of Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the “production of space”: (social) space is not a neutral container but a (social) product. Every society, every mode of production, produces its own space. Bringing this theoretical perspective into the scope of documentary studies, we can regard the rural space depicted in documentary films as a mediated intentional text. The lens (shot scale, lighting, movement), sound (voiceover, effects, music), and structure (juxtaposition, fusion) serve as media through which creators organize the physical space, social space, and cultural space into a coherent system of signification.

Therefore, this study holds that in essence the New Era Chinese rural documentaries constitute a vast field of discursive practice through which creators systematically produce cultural definitions and structures of feeling about what a *beautiful countryside* is and where nostalgia can be anchored. It is not only an issue of aesthetic style in terms of visual image but more importantly an issue of ideological construction and cultural definition in terms of structure of feeling. This research intends to explore the core of this “production” process and decode the grammar of spatial storytelling through which the cinematic medium exerts its powerful and extensive construction on the apparently natural categories of “beauty” and “nostalgia” at this particular historical moment.

1.2 Literature Review

This study’s exploration of spatial narrative approaches in rural documentaries is based on two important foundations: the theoretical background of classical spatial narrative theory and the context of China’s rural realities and its cinematic practices. The review of related literature will help establish an integrated spatial typological framework for analysing New Era Chinese rural-themed documentaries.

Traditional narratology has long been a “time-dominant paradigm”, and treated space as a static background or container of events. It was not until the “Spatial turn” in critical thought that space was recognized as a narrative force that constructs meaning. Scholars put forward various typological schemes. Zoran (1984) put forward a tripartite model—topographical space, chronotopic space and textual space and systematically revealed the progressive relationship of space from static existence, to activation by events and finally to organization by discourse. Chatman’s (2010) distinction between story-space and discourse-space further enriched the understanding of spatiality of narrative act itself and its organization of perception of story.

Among all the above theories, the “Spatial triad” of Henri Lefebvre (1991) provides the basic theoretical support for the following research for its profound historical and social background. He puts forward that space can be divided into three dimensions, namely spatial practice (perceived space), representations of space (conceived and dominant mental/planned space) and representational spaces (lived social space, directly experienced and filled with symbols and meaning). Furthermore, Edward Soja (1989, 1996) explicitly divided space into “Firstspace” (material), “Secondspace” (mental) and “Thirdspace” (social) and defined “Thirdspace” as a transcendence and synthesis of the other two—a real-and-imagined space of social life filled with symbolism, memory and politics. Due to their robust critical power and explanatory power, the theories of Lefebvre and Soja have become frequently cited analytical tools within Chinese domestic studies on spatial narrative and cultural geography, especially in rural studies.

In summary, although the previous research has established a solid foundation through the introduction of spatial narrative theories and typological discussions, the systematic and in-depth application to the specific object of New Era Chinese rural documentaries is still lacking. The current studies based on New Era Chinese rural documentaries tend to focus on theoretical exposition or single-text analysis. There is still a lack of a comprehensive spatial analytical model to effectively integrate physical environment, social relations and cultural representation and further reveal how documentaries participate in the construction of certain specific discourses through spatial narrative. Therefore, this study attempts to integrate the above theoretical resources and construct an analytical framework based on three basic types, namely rural physical space, rural social space

and rural cultural space. This analytical framework can not only cover the diversified contents in documentaries, from material space to spiritual feeling, but also to further conduct an in-depth analysis of how space transfers from being “documented” object to “produced” vehicle of meaning, and further to provides a new critical perspective to decode New Era rural imagery.

1.3 Research Approach

Based on a close analysis of how New Era Chinese rural documentaries construct the spatial discourse of “beauty” and “nostalgia” through visual representation, this study takes textual analysis as its core methodology to conduct systematic analysis of documentary texts presenting audiovisual language and narrative logic. This research goes beyond the description of semantic information contained in documentaries to analyze the formal rules and mechanisms of meaning-making. The specific study proceeds from the following three layers.

First, with regard to the visual layer, this study conducts a formalist close reading of documentary images. The analysis explores how shot scales (especially the deliberate contrast between long shots and close-ups) mediate between macroscopic nostalgia and microscopic feelings; how lighting and color scheme produce spatial atmospheres and express symbolic meanings; how the camera movement guides perception and connects spatial elements, and produces an immersive rural experience.

Second, as for auditory elements, this study explores how the spatial “authenticity” and ideological implication are constructed and used. In addition to the description of semantic content and emotional guidance of voiceover narration, the analysis explores how the collaboration between natural sounds and human sounds produces spatial “authenticity” and ideological implication.

Finally, as for the structural logic of space in macro-narratives, this study analyzes how strategies like spatial juxtaposition and fusion integrate different spaces to express higher-level themes; and explores the latent spatial metaphor in the overall structure and its cultural logic.

Through this systematic and multi-layered textual analysis, this study aims to explore how the spatial discourse of “beauty” and “nostalgia” as a kind of discursive logic is actively constructed through fine-grained systems of visual codes and narrative structure, and to provide solid empirical evidence for the core question of how spatial discourse is produced.

2. Theoretical Framework

This research adopts spatial narrative construction as its analytical perspective, and the spatial typology as its analytical tool. The two bases are respectively derived from two aspects: spatial narrative theory and the critical practice of analyzing narrative texts through different spatial categories. This study focuses on the critical practice of analyzing narrative texts through different spatial categories in the new era Chinese rural documentary films, and regard the use of diverse type of rural spatial types as the specific approach of spatial storytelling in the films. This is the first step of the research: analyzing the selected documentary samples and exploring and elucidating how they use different kinds of spatial types for narratives.

Spatial narrative theory includes two parts of “space” and “narrative”. We begin with “space”. The concept of “space” used in this study is different from the ordinary meaning. In the context of spatial narrative theory, “space” is a more complex concept, which includes different kinds of spatial typologies. In their classifications of spatial types, scholars such as Wesley A. Kort, Chatman, Lefebvre, Edward Soja and Zoran are involved in different kinds of classification. Scholar Kort classifies the space in the novel into “natural space”, “socio-political space” and “personal/intimate space” in his *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* (2004). Chatman (2010) makes a distinction between “story space” (the space where the story events happen) and “discourse space” (the space where the telling/writing happens, including the environment of telling/writing). Zoran in his *Towards a Theory of Space in Narrative* (1984) puts forward an interesting classification: “topographical space” (astatic and physical entity), “chronotopic space” (the spatial structure formed by the events and movement) and “textual space” (the space presented in the text).

This study adopts Henri Lefebvre’s typology. Lefebvre redefined the space through historical, social and spatial perspectives and divided the space into: physical space (related to nature), mental space (related to discourse and power) and social space (related to lived experience). It is clear that in the definition of “social space boundaries”, he distinguished between the physical boundaries (“practical marks”) and conceptual boundaries (“signs of symbols”), both of which were socially produced, permeable and crossing (Lefebvre, 1991).

It is worthy of noting that in the domestic Chinese research on spatial narrative and typology, scholars often adopt Lefebvre’s framework. Scholar Edward Soja further developed Lefebvre’s theory and the concepts of Firstspace, Secondspace and Thirdspace also provide important references for this study. Firstspace represents the material and perceivable world of objects and environment. Secondspace represents the mental conceived space of the environment transcend the material. Thirdspace is the lower level of social space, and surpasses the

material-ideal division. It includes the lived space formed by our environment and culture, and involves cultural, historical, political and economic factors.

Based on above theoretical classification of types of space, we use a spatial lens to re-examine the Chinese countryside in New Era. Actually, rural space in China is formed by above diversified types of spaces interweaving together. Entering the New Era, those above-mentioned rural spaces have changed a lot. They provide documentary rich resources. Specifically, New Era Chinese rural documentaries classify rural space into following three types for narrative: rural physical space, rural social space and rural cultural space. Then, I will analyze how documentary creators use above three spatial types for their narration by referring to related textual cases.

3. The Stage of “Beauty”: The Production of Landscape in Physical Space

3.1 Landscape of Scenery: The Construction of Ecological Beauty and “Picturesque” Aesthetic Convention

Rural physical space can be directly regarded as what Edward Soja once called “Firstspace”—the material space including objects, scene and environment that human can directly feel and touch in their close proximity to their bodies. It coincides with Henri Lefebvre’s description in *The Production of Space*: “perceivable, material, physical objective space such as natural space, which ‘includes production and reproduction, and the particular locations and spatial sets characteristic of each social formation. Spatial practice creates continuity and some degree of cohesion’” (Lefebvre, 1991). In other words, this kind of space is a practiced space, and there are certain requirements for location and spatiality. It is different from Zoran’s “topographical space”, but it is similar to the “material space” mentioned in de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*. No matter what kind of names scholars use, the overall attribute of this kind of space is that it is objective, physical, static and substantial. According to Li Hongbo (2018), “the material natural environment elements and human environment elements in man-land territorial system is called material space”. Rural physical space includes two components: the natural landscape space of countryside and human settlement space of countryside, such as cultivated land, open field, village, rural building, natural geographical area, etc., which are the main components of rural physical space.

Ji Ping (2019) believes that “in the narrative process of any film or television work, geographical space is inevitable. From the macro to the micro, from galactic system or nation to a single mountain, a river, a grassland, or even a street, a garden, it not only is the background of actions of work, but also participates in narrative, and becomes one of the important driving force of narrative development”.

As mentioned earlier, when entering the New Era, due to the influence of development policies such as Rural Revitalization and Poverty Alleviation, the countryside has undergone tremendous changes. In addition to changing the appearance of the countryside, these changes have also brought a large number of new spatial resources and material for the New Era Chinese rural documentaries. As Chen Xin (2008) pointed out, “Different natural landscapes reflect the spatial characteristics of different areas. In documentaries, they not only create an appropriate background environment for the occurrence of the story but also provide space for characters to perform, but also can create a regional atmosphere.” Therefore, the rural physical space in the New Era has become an important part of documentary spatial narrative. These changed rural physical space are presented in documentaries specifically in two ways: first, the rural natural landscape space presenting rural ecological beauty; second, the rural human settlement space presenting rural tradition and modernity.

New Era Chinese rural documentaries present the changed rural natural landscape space presenting rural ecological beauty. New Era Chinese rural documentaries present the changed rural natural landscape space presenting rural ecological beauty. The natural landscape is an important part of the rural physical space. Our country has a vast territory and rich natural geographical and landscape features. There are streams, rivers, forests, hills, plains, mountains, ponds, and lakes in the natural landscape. Since the New Era, the protection and improvement of the natural ecological environment have been focused on, and efforts have been made to achieve a harmonious relationship between man and nature. Under such circumstances, the New Era Chinese rural documentaries conscientiously record the changes in the natural landscape, presenting natural features different from those in the traditional rural documentaries. New Era Chinese rural documentaries present the “beauty of the sky”, the “beauty of abundance”, and the “beauty of ecology” in the rural natural landscape space. In addition, the questionnaire survey results show that most of the respondents believe that documentaries can display changes in the rural physical space.

New Era Chinese rural documentaries present the changed rural natural landscape space presenting rural ecological beauty. In New Era Chinese rural documentaries, *Chinese Villages* and *Remembering Nostalgia* can fully present the natural landscape space presenting the rural ecological beauty. Displaying different spatial types through presenting the natural landscape space is one of the important spatial narrative ways in New Era Chinese rural documentaries.

In *Chinese Villages*, in addition to presenting the ancient villages scattered in China, the creators also present the beautiful and picturesque rural natural landscapes. The creators use an aestheticized visual style to present the vast and spacious terraced fields embedded in *Chinese villages*, framed by distant green mountains and white clouds (Figure 1). The villages are also presented as nesting orderly on the land (Figure 2). In particular, in the episode “Construction” from *Chinese Villages* (2019), the documentary focuses on presenting the natural landscape of Hongcun Village, which is a typical representative of the New Era Chinese countryside. When shooting Hongcun, the creators present mountain ranges with rolling mountains and layered mountains and lakes with clear water and pristine water quality. Together, they construct a spatial aesthetic of a Jiangnan water with small bridges and flowing streams in the visual frame (Figures 3, 4).

Just as its name suggests, *Remembering Nostalgia* also showcases the natural landscape spaces of *Chinese villages*. For example, in the episode “Songkou Town—Hometown in My Heart, an Ancient Hakka Town”, its filmmakers shoot in the villages around the Dayu Ridge area that straddles Guangdong and Jiangxi provinces. To portray the exquisite natural scenery of the area, the natural landscape space shows you the rivers, high mountains and beautiful rural scenery of Dayu Ridge area and gives you an overall feel of the natural ecological scenery of *Chinese villages*.



Figure 1. Terraced Field Landscape in *Chinese Villages*



Figure 2. Village Settlement Layout in *Chinese Villages*



Figure 3. Scene of Small Bridges and Flowing Water in *Chinese Villages*



Figure 4. Courtyard Layout in *Chinese Villages*

3.2 Poetic Dwelling: From Traditional Residences to Modern Housing, Human Settlement Space as a Showcase of Progress

As another form of rural human settlement space, traditional and modern fusion space, rural human settlement space is another form of rural physical space. In the countryside, the function of these architectural spaces is evident: to survive and improve people's daily life and production activities, built and shaped by human labour and wisdom. With the influence of cultural civilization, architectural spaces in China's countryside display two kinds of style, traditional classical rural architectural space and modern rural architectural space. In the New Era Chinese countryside, traditional and modern architectural space coexist and mix together.

On the one hand, because of the overall upgrading of China's economy and the implementation of policies such as Rural Revitalization, Common Prosperity and Beautiful Countryside, the lifestyle in the countryside has become increasingly modern, and the rural living space has been renovated and modernized. On the other hand, there are still a large number of traditional rural architectural spaces existing in China. These spaces are the traces of China's past as an agricultural country, and now they are imbued with cultural tourism and heritage value. People are paying more and more attention to them and protecting them. By presenting these traditional

classical rural living spaces, the New Era Chinese rural documentaries create a space full of nostalgia and longing for homeland. This implantation of the countryside with poetry and positive sentiment is also an important theme expression of the New Era Chinese rural documentaries.

In documentaries presenting traditional Chinese architectural spaces, there are ample representation of New Era Chinese rural documentaries presenting traditional *Chinese villages* and countryside spaces. *Chinese Villages* mainly films traditional villages existing in China and their existence forms and clusters. To present more rustic cultural character of ancient villages, the documentary focuses on spaces in the villages, ancestral halls, gardens and living quarters, etc. In these spaces, we can see ancient buildings existing in China, such as courtyard houses (siheyuan), skywells (tianjing), temples, dwellings, ancestral halls and pavilions (Figures 5, 6). These spaces present the preservation status of traditional rural living spaces, and also present the poetry and culture of the New Era Chinese countryside.

Another documentary is *Remembering Nostalgia*. The documentary shows the traditional Chinese village spaces. The documentary carefully picked 120 traditional villages and 120 historical ancient towns all over China, even more 60 historical and cultural blocks. The typical ancient villages are Luxiang Village in Suzhou, Wangkou Village in Huizhou, Mingyuewan Village in Suzhou, Qiantong Village in Ningbo and other ancient villages. By showing the buildings and living spaces of these typical ancient villages, the Documentary film offers important background spaces for typical rural-themed documentaries to tell stories about traditional Chinese culture, family history and life experience.



Figure 5. Hakka Tulou in *Chinese Villages*



Figure 6. Qiao's Family Compound in *Chinese Villages*

Entering the New Era, with steady socioeconomic growth achieved in China, people's living conditions have generally improved. Based on the principles of urban-rural integration and common prosperity, China has introduced policies such as Rural Revitalization, Poverty Alleviation, and Beautiful Countryside, which have advanced the modernization of rural dwelling spaces and lifestyle improvements. New Era rural documentaries take this into consideration as a crucial approach to presenting spatial narratives.

A representative example is the documentary *Setting Out Again After Poverty Alleviation* (2022), produced by China Central Television. This documentary comprises five episodes: "Charting a New Blueprint," "Consolidating Achievements," "Linking New Tasks," "Building a New Countryside," and "Marching Toward Common Prosperity." In the episode "Charting a New Blueprint," a before-and-after comparison of Huawu Village in Bijie City, Guizhou Province is presented. Before rural revitalization, plagued by poverty, villagers lived in simple, dilapidated structures, leading the village to be known as "the village beneath the cliffs." Following the implementation of rural revitalization policies, Huawu Village has been completely transformed (Figures 7, 8). Aerial shots reveal neat, clean Western-style houses arranged orderly amidst the mountains and rivers, demonstrating a remarkable change in villagers' living spaces. The camera further explores the interiors of these new residences, showcasing modern interior designs and household appliances. These changes are not merely presented in the documentary; they represent real, tangible transformations occurring across rural China.



Figure 7. New Rural Layout in *Setting Out Again After Poverty Alleviation*



Figure 8. New Appearance of Rural Households in *Setting Out Again After Poverty Alleviation* (2022)

3.3 Emerging Domains: New Public Spaces in Libraries and Cafés, and “Counter-Urbanization” Pastoral Imagination

In recent years, a new type of “rural architectural space” has appeared in the Chinese countryside. They are not limited to residential purposes, but can be found in public venues, such as libraries, cafés, guesthouses and art spaces that have been developed as part of rural construction projects. The appearance of these spaces may be described as “counter-urbanization”. As urbanization continues, people living in cities for an extended period of time will be confronted with increasing life pressures, and will experience physical and mental exhaustion. Meanwhile, with the rapid economic development of the countryside, natural scenery that is hard to find in cities gradually appears in the Chinese countryside. Thus, these New Era countryside public spaces developed in the Chinese countryside provide a temporary haven for city escapees who want to relieve their physical and mental exhaustion.

These new rural landscapes are amply presented in the New Era rural documentary *Chinese Villages*. In the episode “Reconstruction” of *Chinese Villages*, the documentary narrates how a group of artists and intellectuals engaged in the design of public spaces in the countryside through “New Rural Construction” projects. They put their design philosophies into practice, as seen in examples like the Art Town in Youyu County, Shanxi Province; new residential buildings in Fuyang and Pujiang; and the renovation of guesthouses in Dali, Yunnan. These new types of rural architectural spaces depict a fresh, poetic image of the contemporary Chinese countryside, where tradition and modernity are interwoven (Figures 9, 10).



Figure 9. Rural Cafe in Chinese Villages



Figure 10. Rural Reading Room in Chinese Villages

4. The Reshaping of Subjectivity: The Relational Narrative of Social Space

4.1 The “Faces” of New Rural Dwellers: The Iconography of Endogenous Actors, Newcomers, and Poverty Alleviation Cadres as Embodiments of the Striving Spirit

Beyond the natural and physical landscape spaces of the Chinese countryside, utilizing the social space typology for narrative purposes constitutes another crucial method and pathway in New Era Chinese rural documentaries. Ji Ping (2019) argues that film and television works, as artistic creations with dual visual and auditory functions, offer the most intuitive means of representing and reflecting upon society. Compared to changes in rural physical space, the rural social space in New Era China contains even richer resources and represents a more significant transformation. Lefebvre posits that space is the space of practice, the realm where all human activities are

initiated and conducted, thus space possesses a social attribute. “Social space is a social product.” Furthermore, Lefebvre contends that social space is also a space that embodies the characteristics of representations of space (Lefebvre, 1991), meaning it specifically “represents and signifies a whole series of social relations linked to production and reproduction.” This space, imbued with social relations of production, fills the void left by understanding space merely as physical and objective, emphasizing the relationship between space and people.

Unlike other countries, China attaches great importance to interpersonal relationships; the history of people’s life in China is history of people’s life in China in terms of human relations.

Zhai Xuewei believes that logic of interpersonal interaction between Chinese and Westerners is different. Westerners usually consider individuals should have autonomous and mobile temporal and spatial arrangement in terms of time and space while Chinese people usually try to have long-term permanence in their temporal and spatial arrangement and have to adapt themselves to stable and durable social relations (Zhai, 2004). In China, countryside is an indispensable part of society. The earliest social relation, social construction and social production way in Chinese society born in countryside. Entering into New Era, Chinese countryside has its own opportunities and challenges for development and change. Rural social space shows its more and more vitality and positive factors, impacting on weaving and changing Chinese rural society. Analyzing some of key documentary texts, we can find that New Era rural social space is an important way to narrate story in *beautiful countryside*. The appearance of rural social space in documentary also differs from the past. The main agents in New Era Chinese rural social space are “new rural dwellers” and the mode of interpersonal interaction is a new pattern of social relations.

“Faces” and “Portraits”: The Self-Portrait of New Era Rural People

“Human beings are the absolute subject of social space” (Ji Ping, 2019). In the social space of Chinese countryside, rural dwellers are the main force. Their subjective image varies in different historical periods. Before New Era, countryside is overwhelmed by the wave of urbanization and modernization. Rural people leave their homeland for cities; their faces were hazy and marginalized. After entering New Era, biggest change of countryside social space is that subjective image of rural dweller has changed. Most of this change is because of the implementation of Rural Revitalization, Poverty Alleviation and Beautiful Countryside policies. Countryside becomes a new blue ocean of China’s economic development; its face of rural dweller becomes clear and specific. Those who originally “flee” from countryside, now they come back. They become the main force of social space of countryside and give human and intellectual support for rural revitalization.

In New Era countryside documentary, creators capture their eyes on these “new rural dwellers” in new social space and delineate their subjective image through their “faces” or “portraits”. This method shows the close connection between space and character portrayal. That is, in rural revitalization documentary *The Changing Chronicles of Rural China*, “new rural dwellers” of different experience, profession or identity appear. They are motivated by New Era rural development either by their own willingness or by the need of rural construction, they are all driving rural revitalization by giving strength. These “new rural dwellers” can be classified into three categories, endogenous rural construction actors, exogenous “new rural dwellers” and rural poverty alleviation cadres.

Endogenous rural construction actors are villagers who grow up in countryside. They improve their agricultural production way by learning new technologies, then motivate themselves to improve their lives. For example, in documentary, Peng Zhaowang motivates himself to cultivate new bag fungi, his income increases and then the whole village prospered (Figure 11).

Exogenous “new rural dwellers” are not dependent on rural life originally. They immigrate to countryside after they discover the resources and development potential of countryside. For example, in documentary, several ceramic artists migrate from other places to Mingyue Village in Sichuan. Then, pottery making by artist residency program drives local prosperity.

Finally, rural poverty alleviation cadres are crucial actors in New Era rural construction. They are responsible for implementing rural revitalization policies and guiding villagers in rural development. For example, poverty alleviation cadre Zhang Shixiong actively promoted poverty alleviation policies in the Guangdong-Guangxi region, leading villagers on the path out of poverty and towards rural revitalization (Figure 12).



Figure 11. Peng Zhaowang Utilizing New Bag Cultivation Techniques for Fungi in *The Changing Chronicles of Rural China*



Figure 12. Poverty Alleviation Cadre Zhang Shixiong in *The Changing Chronicles of Rural China*

4.2 The Renovation of Community: The “Phenomenal” Portrayal of Rural Revitalization Stories and Social Space Transformation

The most distinctive characteristic of rural social space in New Era China is its significant social renovation. When depicting social space, New Era Chinese rural documentaries focus precisely on this renovation. On a theoretical level, “each mode of production, in other words, every society, clarifies a general concept—it produces a space that belongs to it” (Lefebvre, 1991). Entering the New Era, with the realization of comprehensive moderate prosperity and the elimination of absolute poverty under policies like the Poverty Alleviation campaign and Rural Revitalization, Chinese rural society has undergone tremendous transformation. Today, the rural social space in China overall presents a beautiful rural tableau.

As an important “barometer” of social development and change, numerous Chinese rural documentaries in recent years have documentarily presented the transformation of New Era Chinese rural society. Within these documentaries, creators showcase the changes occurring within rural social space due to major social transformations like Rural Revitalization, poverty alleviation, and urban-rural integration.

In the documentary *Ten Years in the Village* (2022), New Era Chinese rural social space is used as an important narrative strategy to plunge audience into real and intensive New Era Chinese rural construction stories. Directed by Liu Junwei, the documentary introduces audiences to ten villages scattered in China. Taking these villages as the starting points, the documentary displays in full the real social changes that have taken place in Chinese countryside since the New Era began. Each of the ten villages is selected as an individual case. The documentary uses these ten villages to display changes in Chinese rural society, economy and culture in terms of each village’s ten-year changes (Figures 13, 14).

Taking Episode 8, “Maihua Fishing Village,” as an example, Maihua Fishing Village is an ancient village located at the foot of Huangshan Mountain in Anhui Province. It has a history of more than a thousand years. For hundreds of years, villagers in Maihua Fishing Village made their living by making penjing (a kind of potted landscape). Because Maihua Fishing Village is a mountainous ancient village, people there lived in a very remote area. Therefore, they were always poor and had no developed transportation. Later, villagers had to leave their ancient craft and leave Maihua Fishing Village.

After the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Chinese government issued a series of pro-rural policies. These policies developed the transportation of Maihua Fishing Village. Penjing industry entered a golden period of development. Under the revitalization principle of “one thriving industry drives a hundred others,” Maihua Fishing Village discovered the business opportunity and gained new vitality. Finally, villagers in Maihua Fishing Village began their distinctive journey to prosperity with “small and beautiful” features. They became an amazing model for all *Chinese villages* (Figure 15). The changes of Maihua Fishing Village represent the changes of whole Chinese rural society. This village represents China’s achievements in great rural change during the New Era.

In Episode 4, “*Home in the Northeast*,” the documentary presents the social landscape and appearance of a New Era village in Northeast China. The Northeast region once played a vital role in China’s modernization construction but faced difficulties during industrial transformation and upgrading. The episode tells the story of a couple, Zhang Yue and Wang Xia, living in Dalian, whose hometown is located deep in the mountains of the Northeast. As their hometown underwent dramatic changes in recent years, the couple found motivation to return and start a business there. Whether the penjing artisans of Maihua Fishing Village or the migrant worker couple Zhang Yue and Wang Xia, they returned to the countryside inspired by Rural Revitalization, finding paths to self-actualization in the New Era Chinese countryside and achieving fulfillment in both material and spiritual

lives.



Figure 13. *Ten Years in the Village* (Ten Years Ago)



Figure 14. *Ten Years in the Village* (Ten Years After)

5. The Anchor of “Nostalgia”: The Affective Construction of Cultural Space

Lefebvre’s third spatial type is the mental representational spaces (Lefebvre, 1991). He argues that representational spaces “need obey no rules of consistency or cohesiveness” and “are directly lived through its associated images and symbols,” whilst also being spaces that are “passively experienced” (Lefebvre, 1991). Humans consciously encode or leave unencoded specific objects, creating signs and constructing diverse systems of symbols and signification, thereby engaging in the creation, storage, transmission, and exchange of culture. In other words, this mental space is what can be termed cultural space. The philosopher Martin Heidegger, in his essay “...Poetically Man Dwells...”, similarly suggests that while people inhabit space physically, they should strive to dwell within an ideal cultural space where the soul and spirit can find solace (Heidegger, 1971). Likewise, the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s concept of “sense of place” carries a similar resonance. “Sense of place” refers to a new type of “human-land relationship,” one reconstructed by cultural and social characteristics, “based on the subjectivity of human experience of place, its connotations including the features and personality of the place itself, and the emotions of attachment and identity people hold towards a place” (Tuan, 1974). It can be said that Tuan’s “sense of place” articulates the essential nature of the “human-land relationship.” Since then, the meaning of “sense of place” has been continuously updated and reconstructed alongside ongoing social, economic, and cultural transformations. Thus, we can infer that “sense of place” is essentially a cultural process of continuous generation (Knopf, 1994). Wang Changsong (2023) posits that social space is not only an objectively existing space but also condenses social relations and social production. On this basis, social space is endowed with “temporality and a dynamic processuality,” thereby forming cultural space. Wang Juren (2022) considers cultural space to denote “a place centrally used for hosting folk and traditional cultural activities.” Consequently, cultural space has also emerged as a significant spatial typology within the spatial narrative criticism of narrative texts such as literature and film.

The countryside is also a cultural space. Firstly, regarding the concept of “culture” itself, Wang Xiaopeng (2017) defines it as “the aggregate of material culture and intangible ideas created by humanity during its existence to maintain orderly survival and sustainable development, influencing a series of social life practices and interpersonal interactions, and interconnected with socio-political and economic development.” Specifically concerning “rural culture,” Zhang Zhongwen (2010) defines traditional rural culture as a “system of farmers’ values gradually internalized over the long term by the villager community through entities such as village covenants, folk customs, and cultural material heritage.” Based on this definition, this research posits that rural culture refers to the system of values governing rural life, formed within rural space by rural subjects through various rural activities and forms (village covenants, folk customs, cultural material heritage, etc.).

In summary, New Era rural documentaries differ from traditional fictional film narratives, which often carry strong creator subjectivity. Documentaries are more intrinsically linked to cultural factors such as society, history, politics, religion, and art. This characteristic provides the possibility for New Era rural documentaries to engage in spatial narrative specifically at the level of cultural space.

5.1 The Metaphor of “Home”: The Value-Laden Dimensions of “Family” Culture, Festivals, and Family Traditions

Through long-term social development, the Chinese countryside has formed a relatively complete cultural system with a large number of cultural types, which is a kind of self-sufficient cultural space. Zhang Zhongwen (2010) believes that the culture in the Chinese countryside includes culture about food, folk custom, folk art and ethical-moral. In the New Era rural documentary, these kinds of cultural types are conveyed through symbolic

expression, taking the rural cultural space as the carrier to excavate and display the culture in the Chinese countryside in a large variety.

As mentioned above, due to the important position of traditional culture in the Chinese countryside, New Era rural documentaries excavate and display these traditional cultures and construct the rural cultural space which contains traditional Chinese culture, which also becomes an important theme and value orientation in the creation of New Era rural documentaries. Taking the culture of “home” or “family” for example, although the culture of “home” or “family” exists everywhere where people live, the Chinese people attach great importance to it. In a certain sense, Chinese culture can be called a kind of “family” culture (Fei Xiaotong, 1996). There are some New Era rural documentaries which display this kind of “family” culture existing in the Chinese countryside. This kind of culture displays the deep Chinese connotation of “home”. It includes family life, wedding and funeral, interpersonal communication and various feelings between people. In this respect, *Our Holiday* and the CCTV documentary *Family Style* (2018) narrate and display the “family” culture existing in traditional Chinese rural society.

Our Holiday focuses on traditional Chinese festivals such as the Spring Festival, Qingming Festival, Dragon Boat Festival and Mid-Autumn Festival. It displays how several representative ordinary families in *Chinese villages* celebrate these festivals. This documentary displays the connection between every Chinese person and “home”. It sculpts a kind of “family” space through its image (Yu Xi, 2022).

The culture of “rice”, “tea”, “herbal medicine” and “farming” also belongs to the rural culture.

The documentary *Family Style* focuses on Chinese “family” culture. This documentary can be divided into two parts. The first part is “Gestation”. It displays how ancient Chinese sages understood “home” and the influence of “family” on individuals. Viewers can experience the “family” culture in this part. The second part is “*Inheritance*”. This part takes “passing down” as its theme. It displays the wisdom and ethos contained in “family” culture by narrating the “family tradition” stories of eminent historical figures.

Rural culture also includes other types such as “rice culture”, “tea culture”, “herbal medicine culture” and “farming culture” (Liu Yonghua, 2011).

5.2 The Evocation of Memory: Landmark Architecture, Historical Sites, and the Resistance Against “Cultural Forgetting”

Memory and Cultural Nostalgia in the New Era Countryside

The countryside can be imbued with memory and nostalgia, which are themselves components of culture. New Era Chinese rural documentaries strive to construct the countryside as a cultural space saturated with “memory and nostalgia,” subsequently utilizing this space for narratives centered on these themes. The British sociologist Paul Connerton (2009) argues that factors such as the continuous expansion of human settlements, environmental degradation, and accelerated production rates contribute to the formation of “cultural forgetting.” This concept of “cultural forgetting,” as described by Connerton, is quite prevalent in the development of human societies, particularly in the context of urban-rural dynamics. This “cultural forgetting” reflects, to some extent, the recent situation in China. Prior to the New Era, the Chinese countryside, caught in a modernization process prioritizing speed and efficiency, was gradually being forgotten. The New Era Chinese countryside, however, is reclaiming this forgotten culture by endowing it with memory, emotion, imagination, and sentiment. By attributing these elements to the New Era countryside, it offers urban dwellers an imaginative rural utopia and psychological solace distinct from city life.

In the New Era Chinese rural documentary *Remembering Nostalgia*, the creators present this rural cultural space, filled with memory and nostalgia, as a significant typology of narrative space. In this documentary, the creators showcase landmark architectures from different regions, attempting to use these specific structures to evoke viewers’ nostalgia and memory. While watching and identifying these buildings, viewers unconsciously construct an internal rural memory and cultural space, thereby triggering their longing for home.

For example, for natives of Jinan or Shandong province, the Old Street of Spring City in Jinan carries their nostalgia. In the documentary, the creators unearth elements such as the architecture, cuisine, and humanistic landscapes of the Spring City Old Street. They present these in visual form and reconstruct the daily living habits of Jinan people “dwelling by the springs,” thereby building a nostalgic space for them.

Similarly, for Cantonese people, the Yuankui Tower in Songkou Town, Guangdong, embodies their nostalgia. As a landmark, the Yuankui Tower has stood for centuries on the Mei River, witnessing countless partings and reunions of Songkou townspeople with their homeland, becoming a symbol of nostalgia in the hearts of Hakka wanderers. By presenting cultural spaces themed around “nostalgia,” *Remembering Nostalgia* not only strengthens identification with traditional Chinese culture but also stimulates the vitality of building a *beautiful countryside* in the New Era.

5.3 The Layering of History: Superimposing Historical Figures and Events in Space to Construct a Continuous National Identity

Historical Space in New Era Rural Documentaries

Historical space constitutes another type of cultural space. Long Di Yong (2008) also posits that all historical events occur within concrete spaces. Those places which bear various historical events, collective memories, and national identity become special landscapes, sites of history. Therefore, beyond being an objective, material space and a social space, Chinese rural space has also been the stage for various historical events, constituting a cultural-historical space that condenses collective memory and national identity.

Many works within the corpus of New Era Chinese rural documentaries delve into and present the historical and cultural elements of traditional villages. For instance, in the documentary *Remembering Nostalgia*, the creators not only craft a “nostalgic memory space” but also, rooted in China’s historical soil, narrate historical stories that occurred in the Chinese countryside, constructing a historical cultural space. The countryside is not only a crucial site where history happened but also carries rich historical stories and cultural memories. Firstly, many historical figures who played significant roles in China’s historical process are associated with the countryside. Secondly, numerous historical relics or sites exist in rural areas, serving as important material carriers of Chinese historical spirit and discourse. Simultaneously, the countryside possesses many culturally artistic forms of expression passed down through history.

For example, in the episode “*Songkou Town—Deep Affection for the Hometown, an Ancient Hakka Town*” from *Remembering Nostalgia*, the stories of several native Songkou townspeople are told, as they all played important roles in Chinese history. Liang Mi’an was a supporter of Sun Yat-sen in founding the Tongmenghui (Chinese Revolutionary Alliance), devoting his family fortune to assist him. During the War of Resistance against Japan, Li Ai abandoned his medical career to join the army, sacrificing his life for the country. After the founding of New China, Yu Lianqing devoted himself to education, becoming an educator. In the New Era, the young entrepreneur Liao Jianming actively responded to rural revitalization policies, leading the entire village to prosperity. Songkou Town is thus not merely a space of nostalgia, holding the memories and longing of countless people; it has also become a space of history and culture. Songkou Town reflects the radiance of history in each period of China’s past, becoming a microcosm of the development of modern Chinese history. In *Remembering Nostalgia*, the historical space not only showcases real history through figures but also embodies the philosophies and values reflected in traditional Chinese culture.

In summary, New Era Chinese rural documentaries employ multiple spatial narrative approaches in their creation, encompassing the objective physical space, the social space, and the cultural space of the countryside. Creators fully excavate these different spatial types and use storytelling methods to showcase the resources of the New Era countryside. For instance, by presenting the rural physical space, they allow the audience to see the tremendous changes in the overall appearance of the Chinese countryside. By displaying the rural social space, viewers can understand the state of rural social governance. By excavating the resources of rural cultural space, the documentaries endow the New Era Chinese countryside with rich cultural connotations. Consequently, through the presentation of different spatial typologies, these documentaries provide a crucial narrative pathway, making the stories of the New Era Chinese countryside more diverse and multifaceted. This spatial narrative method helps the documentaries better express the theme of the *beautiful countryside*.

6. Juxtaposition and Fusion: The Deeper Meaning of Spatial Structure

In the preceding analysis, we have explored how New Era Chinese rural documentaries utilize different spatial typologies for spatial narrative. According to the perspectives of spatial narrative theory and spatial narrative criticism, the use of three spatial types—rural physical space, social space, and cultural space—has become a significant pathway and method for spatial narrative in rural documentaries. How, then, are these different types of spaces organized and arranged within the documentaries?

Firstly, everything that occurs within New Era Chinese rural documentaries—including character actions, story events, and spatial transformations—unfolds within specific spatial settings. In other words, space here serves as the “field” or “container” bearing all documentary content. It is the “a frame, a place of action” for documentary narrative (Bal, 2003). Consequently, these spaces are represented through various spatial combination techniques.

Moreover, the kind of rural spaces depicted in New Era Chinese rural documentaries are different from those in reality. These rural spaces in documentaries are created in cinematic documentaries and its audiovisual code. That is, documentaries are different from other films in that they have their own kind of code and expression. That is; by filming some visual clips and recording some sounds and then editing them in certain ways, documentaries compose a cinematic text that can be interpreted by people. According to Ricœur, “Text is any discourse fixed by writing” (Ricœur, 1981). That is, the rural space in New Era Chinese rural documentaries is in

fact a kind of “system of signification”, a text spun from image and sound — a cinematic rural textual space created by the documentary footage and pointing to certain kinds of themes and attitudes.

Therefore, in other words, in summary, in this section, we have analyzed how space is represented through different kinds of spatial combination techniques and how these spaces are created and expressed through cinematic means and audiovisual techniques used in documentaries. This is also an important way and method to introduce spatial narrative into New Era Chinese rural documentaries.

After studying a large number of classic New Era Chinese rural documentaries, I find that the organization and arrangement of space in these documentaries follow three kinds of modes, that is, juxtaposition, fusion and metaphor. In other words, documentary creators organize and arrange different kinds of space in these three modes. This is the most distinct way in which the mode of storytelling through rural spaces is different from that of stories organized and arranged around “time”, which is the unique feature of spatial narrative (Long Di Yong, 2015).

6.1 The Dialectics of Juxtaposition: Regional Juxtaposition

Spatial juxtaposition is the most commonly used kind of spatial combination technique used in New Era Chinese rural documentaries. This mode of juxtaposition means to compose multiple spaces into a whole. Each space is a subspace/narrative serving for a single overarching theme. Juxtaposing these multiple subspace/narratives which serve for a single overarching theme and then creating a holistic spatial space (Long Di Yong, 2015).

In New Era Chinese rural documentaries, *Beautiful Countryside* is an example. *Beautiful Countryside* is a ten-episodes documentary. This documentary mainly displays people’s rural life experience in different geographical environment in China, a big agricultural country. The title of every single episode of this documentary is named after a region in China. For example, the Edge of the Sky, The End of the Sea, The Mountain Valley, The Water Village, South of the Clouds and so on. The narrative in *Beautiful Countryside* takes place in these kinds of spatial locales. For example, in South of the Clouds, the documentary displays rural life in areas of Yunnan, Guizhou and Sichuan. In this episode, the creators create a holistic spatial space using three juxtaposed villages as the storytelling spaces. That is, Azheke Village, Kongbai Village and Xiaohuang Village (Figures 15, 16, 17).

In “South of the Clouds”, the director selects documentaries from these three villages to show their own unique form, from farming life in Azheke Village of Hani Ethnicity to Kongbai Village silversmith’s inheritance of Miao Ethnicity Silver Jewelry Craftsmanship (Figure 18) and Xiaohuang Village’s Dong Ethnicity Folk Songs.

In summary, *Beautiful Countryside* uses spatial juxtaposition to integrate various kinds of rural space and family space to narrate the production and life of people living in the “South of the Clouds” area. So that the audience can understand the theme from different perspectives and better understand and feel the rural area (Li Jiaxin, 2023).



Figure 15. Azheke Village in *Beautiful Countryside*



Figure 16. Kongbai Village in *Beautiful Countryside*

Figure 17. Xiaohuang Village in *Beautiful Countryside*Figure 18. Silver Craftsmanship in *Beautiful Countryside*

In New Era Chinese rural documentaries, *Chinese Villages* is the best example. *Chinese Villages* is a documentary that exposes the rich cultural connotation and complexity existing in China's ancient villages. The ancient villages are not simple buildings. The villages are the birthplace, the stage, and the carrier of Chinese culture, thus constituting a complicated cultural field. Therefore, in the process of documentation and representation of China's ancient villages, the film explores its basic expressions of tradition and modernity, countryside and city.

Chinese Villages is composed of seven episodes. The seven episodes display villages from different angles and themes. The seven episodes are titled Picturesque, Construction, Family Legacy, Gazing Homeward, Work and Leisure, Pastoral and Reconstruction. Each episode interprets Chinese ancient villages from a different angle to make a comprehensive and multidimensional display of culture of Chinese ancient villages, thereby enhancing and raising the overall theme of culture of *Chinese villages*.

For example, the first episode Picturesque interprets the protection of ancient villages' natural ecology by displaying the natural landscape and environment of ancient villages in different regions of China. While the fourth episode Gazing Homeward extends the space to nostalgia, expressing the Chinese people's yearning and belonging to their homeland. This episode displays many stories of wanderers and their homeland villages. By displaying multiple village spaces, the documentary expresses the modern looking back to homeland from space. That is to say, express deep feelings and find places where people have always been seeking.

Mr. Feng was born in Tianjin, but his hometown is in Cixi, Ningbo, Zhejiang. Entering his forties, Mr. Feng began to search for his roots. He gradually developed an attachment to his hometown. Later, Mr. Feng found an opportunity to hold a painting exhibition at home. He went to Cixi to look for his ancestral house. Finally, he found the house and village where his father was born.

In the seventh episode Reconstruction, the creators explore the modernization and future of China's ancient villages. This episode displays the reconstruction in some villages, such as Yu Village in Anji, Zhejiang; Luxiang Ancient Village in Suzhou, Jiangsu; and Langde in Qiongzhusi, Guizhou. By displaying these reconstructed spaces, the documentary expresses that China's ancient villages are not simply conservative and isolated spaces. In the New Era, China's ancient villages are being reconstructed. They are full of vitality and new dynamism in the process of reconstruction.

Chinese Villages successfully displays large and overall spaces and small and specific spaces under each sub-theme. The documentary uses spatial juxtaposition in three main ways to profoundly deepen and sublimely elevate its basic theme exploration by using spatial juxtaposition at different scales.

Regional Juxtaposition ("Picturesque")—Comparing the differences in natural environment and ecological environment of villages in different regions (such as the southern water villages and the northern mountain villages) to show the regional differences and the universal value of ecological protection in the same national space of "ancient villages".

Thematic Juxtaposition (Compared with Episodes)—Putting different thematic spaces side-by-side at the level of episodes. "Family Legacy" episode (with clan halls and ancestral rituals as spaces of legacy) is juxtaposed with the "Reconstruction" episode (with modernized infrastructures and artistic spaces). This generates a kind of dialectic between tradition and modernity and encourages reflection on the two.

Functional Juxtaposition ("Reconstruction")—In an episode like "Reconstruction", putting villages that have undergone different types of functional reconstruction side-by-side (Yu Village focuses on eco-tourism, Luxiang on heritage site, and Lande on cultural performance) to show the diversity of paths and models for the renaissance of ancient villages in the contemporary era.

With such layering of spatial juxtapositions, *Chinese Villages* transcends a mere description and builds a sophisticated narrative with deeper understanding of the who, lasting value, and uncertain future of China's ancient villages.

6.2 Utopia of Fusion: The Interweaving of Physical, Social, and Cultural Spaces

Mode of spatial fusion means that the objective material space, social space and cultural space are presented in an interwoven way in New Era Chinese rural documentaries. It shows that when a documentary narrates a certain space, the makers will synthesize the different spatial typologies in the narration of that space, i.e. while narrating a certain rural story, the documentary makers present the material space of the rural area, social space of the area's residents and the background culture of the area in an interwoven way.

This is indeed the case with the spatial fusion in reality. At present, villages in the countryside are developing in all aspects. When Yun Di studied urban-rural integration for common prosperity in the New Era, he found that urban-rural integration is not only embodied in the fusion of industry and institutions, but also in the fusion of culture and public services. The integration in these fields also promotes spatial fusion, making rural space development more comprehensive (Yun Di 2023).

In the micro-documentary series *Ideal Countryside* (2022), apart from telling stories of villagers and other people involved in rural revitalization work in the countryside, the series also advances the narrative of diverse rural spaces in New Era China through the technique of spatial fusion. The series tells the stories of people of different professions and backgrounds engaged in rural revitalization work, including local villagers, returning youth, volunteers, rural doctors, architects and artists.

In *Ideal Countryside*, through the stories of people of different professions and backgrounds engaged in rural revitalization work, the technique of spatial fusion advances the narrative of diverse rural spaces in New Era China.

In the episode “She Picks Up the Camera” (Figure 19, 20) of *Ideal Countryside*, the maker tells the story of Peng Xiaoli, a Tibetan woman from Qiaoqi, Ya'an, Sichuan. Holding a camera, she documents the life in the countryside. As Peng Xiaoli herself said in the micro-documentary, she no longer wanted to be a woman who only thought about husband and children. By learning a new skill, taking photos, she escaped from the trivial and everyday aspects of life in the countryside. Picking up the camera, Peng Xiaoli escaped from traditional rural spaces. She was no longer the woman who did farming work every day, but had become an observer and recorder.

After receiving the camera, Peng Xiaoli soon liberated herself from the narrow space of “one space” and traveled into many kinds of rural spaces: On one hand, she roams in the space of villagers' lives, which involves food, clothing and shelter. On the other hand, she roams in different spaces of countryside — big or small, and records other people's lives. When she photographs Qiaoqi Tibetan Wedding, she stays in the venue of wedding and records Tibetan traditions; when she shoots the documentary Serda Mailong, she goes into ethnic minorities' farmland in the role of anthropologist and records their farming process. In fact, Peng Xiaoli's photographic work is her own space of vision, and all the above-mentioned spaces keep extending her range and boundaries.



Figure 19. “She Picks Up the Camera” in *Ideal Countryside*



Figure 20. Peng Xiaoli Using a Camera to Photograph in *Ideal Countryside*

In summary, the preceding analysis has examined how documentary creators orchestrate and arrange space within the textual fabric of their works, primarily through the modes of spatial juxtaposition and spatial fusion. However, documentary, as a prevalent form of visual media, is not merely about reproducing, representing, and recording an objective reality; it is fundamentally an act of artistic creation. Regarding artistic creation, the renowned American art critic Rudolf Arnheim argued, “If the purpose of artistic creation were only the direct or

analogous representation of nature, or merely to please the senses, its prominent place in society would be puzzling” (Arnheim, 1984). Song Jie (2003) similarly contends that the elevated status of art stems from the symbols and metaphors within artistic texts. Therefore, in this study, the core of spatial narrative is not merely the combination of spaces in specific ways to display events for narrative purposes. More crucially, within documentaries, creators should form a meaningful spatial system through specific spatial arrangements. This implies expressing the meaning and value of space through spatial symbolism and metaphor.

In New Era Chinese rural documentaries, these films do not just comprehensively scan rural stories from various angles; more importantly, they use the artistic technique of metaphor, conveyed through these stories, to communicate the essence and spirit of the New Era Chinese rural space. This approach constitutes the analysis of the artistic expression of New Era rural space.

Specifically, New Era Chinese rural documentaries differ from any previous period of Chinese rural imagery, as they exist within a unique cultural context. This context has given rise to new ideas and reflections, endowing New Era rural documentaries with a distinct humanistic and rustic quality. By analyzing typical examples, this research summarizes the spatial metaphors in these documentaries into three types: the spatial metaphor of the rural dweller’s spirit, the spatial metaphor progressing from individual to collective memory, and the spatial metaphor of modern poeticism and nostalgia. These metaphors collectively grant New Era Chinese rural documentaries their unique mode of expression and profound connotation.

The documentary *Remembering Nostalgia*, by juxtaposing different spaces, showcases traditional rural virtues like “filial piety” (孝), “benevolence” (善), and “family” (家) culture. For instance, the episode “*Pingshan Village*” focuses on how the Shu Rongdu and Shu Xiangeng families emphasize and perpetuate “filial piety” culture. The Shu Xiangeng family was chosen as representative because their history is imbued with traditional ethics and the spirit of filial piety. Within this family, filial piety is manifested not only in respect for elders but also in reverence for ancestors never met. It is evident that in the Shu Xiangeng family, filial piety is not just an individual moral quality but the continuation of a family tradition, setting a fine example. This traditional virtue is inherited and carried forward by Shu Xiangeng himself, who not only fulfills his filial duties to his own parents but also contributes to society. Regarding the spatial metaphor of “benevolence” culture, the example of Lady Wang from the Qianlong era is primarily used. Lady Wang was an exceptionally kind and virtuous woman. She practiced the values of filial piety and treating others with kindness through her own actions, earning deep respect and affection from her family and community. At home, Lady Wang provided meticulous care for her elders and showed great affection for her juniors. In her interactions with others, she placed great emphasis on kindness, frequently providing timely help to her neighbors and being always ready to assist others, truly embodying through her personal conduct the praise for “treating others with kindness” in the Chinese rural spirit.

When New Era Chinese rural documentaries employ spatial fusion for narrative, it essentially reflects the process of urban and rural areas moving from opposition to integrated development. This narrative mode of spatial fusion expresses the concept of the “urban-rural community” in the New Era, illustrating how cities and the countryside coalesce and converge during development, thereby reflecting a new discourse of urban-rural integration. If Zhang Binzhe (2023), in his article “The Spatial Structure, Production Order, and Construction Path of the Urban-Rural Community—Based on the Perspective of Symbiosis Theory,” offers practical suggestions for realizing the “ideal vision of the urban-rural community” from three aspects—“decentralizing structure to maintain spatial justice,” “resolving urban-rural development contradictions to restore endogenous motivation,” and “transforming local development advantages to build a sustainable urban-rural community”—then, in New Era Chinese rural documentaries, this “ideal vision of the urban-rural community” also finds expression in the cinematic text through the form of spatial combination. This is particularly true in reflecting the contemporary context, where the real rural space and the cinematic space in documentaries highly overlap, demonstrating the close connection between reality and imagery.

For example, in documentaries focusing on “Rural Revitalization,” the “ideal vision of the urban-rural community” is displayed through spatial fusion. These documentaries show how villages promote the construction of public service systems through self-transformation, including rural planning, the development of rural industries, and the rational planning of urban-rural infrastructure like transportation, education, and healthcare, to narrow the gap with cities. On the other hand, in rural documentaries themed around “Beautiful China,” integrated urban-rural development is the core thread. This type of documentary uses authentic rural stories to showcase the integration and interaction between urban and rural areas in terms of space, industry, and culture, presenting a new outlook of integrated urban-rural development. By displaying the natural scenery, cultural landscapes, and characteristic industries of the countryside, these documentaries enable the audience to gain a deeper understanding of the beauty and charm of rural areas, thereby enhancing their sense of identity and belonging towards the countryside.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary: “Beauty” and “Nostalgia” as a Discursive System Produced by Documentary Audiovisual Language and Narrative Structure

This study, in its systematic textual analysis, ultimately reveals that “beauty” and “nostalgia” in New Era Chinese rural documentaries are not passively rendering an objective reality, but rather a discursive system that is produced through the systematic use of audiovisual language and narrative strategies. This mechanism of production follows a clear logical pathway: First, through the narrativization of spatial typologies, the countryside is systematically decomposed and restructured into three major spatial dimensions—the physical, the social, and the cultural. These three spatial dimensions bear, respectively, the burden of a landscaped “beauty,” an ordered “harmony,” and an emotionalized “memory.” Subsequently, at the level of technical execution of audiovisual language, strategies of shot scale (long shots versus close-ups), expressive lighting and composition, guiding camera movements, as well as emotionally charged voiceover narration and carefully selected/processed soundscapes, together produce highly aestheticized and emotionalized rural imagery. Finally, at the level of systematic spatial structuring, macro-narrative strategies of juxtaposition and fusion integrate diverse and scattered rural spaces into a holistic discursive system concerning “Beautiful China” and the “urban-rural community.” The underlying motivation for the entire chain of interlocking processes of systematic discursive production lie in its response to and participation in the cultural and ideological constructions of the New Era. Through sustained and large-scale cinematic production of “beauty” and “nostalgia,” documentaries successfully mould them into a dominant cultural structure of feeling. This cultural structure produces an idealized rural imagination on an aesthetic level and effectively consolidates cultural identity and transmits mainstream values on an ideological level, thus strongly serving the national strategy of Rural Revitalization and the contemporary formation of national identity.

Therefore, the core conclusion of this research is that the rural space in these documentaries is, in essence, a meticulously mediated construct—symbolized field with specific discursive functions. Its “authenticity” lies in its highly self-aware and sophisticated mechanism of discursive production.

7.2. Critical Reflections

Critical Reflections on Construction Process Itself

While this study systematically explains how documentaries construct the discourse of “beauty” and “nostalgia,” it is important to remain critically aware of this process of construction itself.

First, this highly aestheticized and emotional discourse production not only consolidates identity and shows achievements, but also inevitably hides the complexity and diversity of rural reality. Documentary lens filters out “failure stories” and “typical landscapes,” forming a “symbolic reality” about the countryside. On the contrary, the pain of development, cultural conflicts caused by modernization, and marginalized groups and regions left behind in development are deliberately or unintentionally downplayed or ignored in this system of discourse. This selective representation may cause a simplified and flattened understanding of countryside.

Second, such a discourse system may lead to the essentialization and fossilization of “nostalgia” and traditional culture. In order to increase the appeal of the story and promote the formation of a coherent identity, documentary films tend to ground “nostalgia” in certain cultural symbols and scraps of history deemed “authentic.” On the one hand, this can trigger collective memory; on the other, it may unwittingly solidify and simplify the inherent fixedness, hybridity, and creativity of rural culture in contemporary use, turning a living and developing rural culture into a dead cultural specimen for “nostalgic consumption.”

Finally, still standing in relation to the connection between space and power, documentaries are non-neutral mass media that produce influence. The “beauty” and “nostalgia” produced by documentaries, which are constrained by certain historical contexts, resonate profoundly and connect closely with grand narratives like the national Rural Revitalization Strategy and the building of cultural confidence. While this is certainly one aspect of the positive social integration function of the mass media, we cannot help but ponder: Whose “beauty” is it in this discourse production, and whose “nostalgia” is it? How much of the complex and diversified voices and demands of the rural subjects are actually included in the constructed cultural identity?

This critical reflection does not aim to deny the positive value of documentary creation but seeks to reveal the inherent power dimension within any discourse production. Therefore, it hopes to open up broader theoretical space for future rural visual practices that are more reflective, inclusive, and diverse.

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