

Image Construction of Chinese Rural Culture on Short Video Platforms

—The Case of “Classmate Zhang”

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Abstract: Short videos of rural culture have become a hot topic in China under the new media environment. Rural culture has also been reconstructed by short video creators and viewers because of the popularity of rural short videos. “Classmate Zhang” is one of the more typical examples. As a short video platform, the formation of the phenomenon that triggers a lot of attention to the dissemination of rural culture - “Classmate Zhang”, in the video influences people’s attitude towards rural culture through the extensive use of many types of symbols. Among them, the rural symbols play their value and realize rural culture dissemination by carrying as well as spreading cultural connotations and triggering emotional resonance among viewers. This study centers on the use of rural symbols in short rural videos, the way they have used the meanings they are constructed, and how symbols can be better utilized to achieve rural cultural communication.

Keywords: rural short video, village symbol, village picture, image construction, Chinese rural culture

1. Introduction

The countryside is the cradle of Chinese culture, and the development of Chinese culture over the past five thousand years has given it its own unique character and history, making it an enduring and vast countryside in the sense of vernacular China. China’s countryside with its own boundaries and images of its own existence, and precisely because of this long-accumulated vernacular, it has its most unique value.

In China’s rapid economic development, We-Media has become the main cultural communication channel. China emphasizes the development of rural culture and rural economy. With the support of both the state and social media platforms, farmer creators began to appear on the platforms, and short videos of rural culture gradually became a popular topic. The Douyin 2022 Harvest Data Report showed that the number of short video submissions on rural culture themes continues to grow. In just one year through 2022, the platform reached 430 million short videos related to rural culture. As of 2022, compared with the previous year, the broadcast volume of short videos with rural themes has increased by 77%, and 38.4 billion viewers have praised the countryside in short videos, until now,

the popular short video platform is gradually becoming a “new agricultural tool” for promoting rural development.

Rural short video is a brand new path for farmers to export their views in the new media era when the communication discourse system of rural culture has gradually begun to shift from the bottom up. Rural short videos are made by farmers as the filmmakers and subjects, the videos are 3-8 minutes long, with the theme of rural life, showing farmers’ daily labor, making food, and other content [1]. The essence of a rural short video lies more in the content of the emotional expression, a simple and easy environment presents a more complete and natural state of rural life, expression with simple emotions, and simple camera language hand to cause a greater degree of emotional resonance of the viewers to realize the essence of the rural short video emotional touch. Rural short videos continue to play an important mediating role in the construction of the rural image, profoundly affecting the process of farmer-oriented media practice in the media space field. In other words, rural self-publishers can use short videos with symbolic connotations to construct the image of the countryside for the public.

Rural symbols are symbolic expressions of the natural environment, living customs, history, culture, and social relations in the countryside, as well as a true record of the general way of life and living conditions in the countryside, which have accumulated over time [2]. Thus in short videos, specific symbols may influence the viewer’s impression of the countryside. Rural symbols have a meaningful point of view, breaking through time and space limitations, breaking through the barrier between urban and rural areas, and entering into the Internet, which realizes the mobile dissemination of rural symbols so that the result is the formation of a unique and specific picture of the countryside on the short-video platform. It is because of these rural symbols appearing in the rural video, creating a picture of the countryside recognized by the public, constructing a unique image of the countryside on the short-video media platform, and further arousing the widespread attention of viewers as well as their longing for the countryside. For example, “Ziqi Li” displays a natural and beautiful image of the countryside through symbols such as the green mountains and waters of the Chinese countryside, manual labor in the countryside, and harvest picking. The “Country Food Uncle” uses countryside food to display a healthy and green image of the countryside, while the “Hmong Amei” shows an interesting and diverse cultural image of the countryside through the presentation of special cultural customs.

In the countryside video many self-media platforms, the current more representative case is “Classmate Zhang (short for Zhang)”. “Zhang” is creating a rural image and spreading rural culture by creating unique cultural symbols to show the daily life of northern farmers. In 2021, “Zhang” on the Douyin platform exploded across the net at an astonishing speed, with ten million fans and hundreds of millions of views in two months. As of August 2023, the number of fans of “Zhang” is nearly 18 million, and the number of likes is more than 140 million. Among the 185 video works released by “Zhang” on the Douyin platform, his single video has 2.6 million likes, the number of comments is nearly 150,000, and the number of forwards is as high as 200,000, creating Internet communication with great repercussions. It has created a phenomenal communication that is very representative of the countryside - the phenomenon of “Zhang”.

2. Literature Review

As everyone knows, there are various forms of short videos of the countryside, but they all construct a unique image of the countryside with symbols. This has triggered many scholars to analyze the research related to the construction of the image of the countryside on short video platforms as well as the use of countryside symbols in short videos.

First of all, in the very close connection of the media with people and society. As Guy Debord puts it, the image is perceived as a seemingly real presence, and real societies gradually begin to be

constructed as landscapes under images [3]. Modern society has become a mediatized society and the media has an irreplaceable role in modern society [4]. Under the impact of the characteristic mobility of self-media, the traditional rural social community's maintenance mechanism based on real space and face-to-face interaction has been transformed. Nowadays, village short videos have become an indispensable part of village image construction [5]. Ye Cao and Gang Cao demonstrate that short videos have become a new type of urban-rural interaction in the digital age. The use of multiple visual symbols by rural creators to reconstruct their daily lives and the desire of urban users for a "enjoy life" in the countryside have jointly shaped the interaction between rural creators and urban users under the digital platform of short videos [6].

In modern society, "the countryside" and "the city" have been artificially constructed as two opposing lifestyles: on the one hand, the city symbolizes modern civilization, development, and advancement, while the countryside is full of pre-modern barbarism, ignorance and backwardness; on the other hand, the city is also regarded as the embodiment of desire, utilitarianism and indifference, while the countryside is gradually becoming a place of solace for the modern people because of its simplicity, warmth and kind-hearted qualities [7]. Rural culture is increasingly appearing as a reflection of urban life, and people are becoming more and more interested in rural culture and rural life. At the same time, rural creators have discovered this characteristic of the audience, and also intentionally add rural cultural emotions to gain the empathy of the audience through short rural videos [8]. Like Erving Goffman's theory of dramaturgical [9], The physical performance of the creators who live in the countryside on social media is a kind of "virtual presence", and when they shoot short videos of the countryside, on the one hand, they record their lives, and on the other hand, more importantly, they accomplish the purpose of establishing social relationships, constructing their self-image in an interactive environment, and attracting viewers to watch the videos [10]. Now there are more and more rural short videos showing the viewing structure of "urban users watching rural creators", showing to more urban users, and the rural short videos were gradually shown to more urban users.

Therefore, for rural self-media people, their creation will fully display the charm of the rural natural environment with the help of a variety of audio-visual symbols, actively convey a view of ecological harmony, and reshape the sense of identity of their hometowns, so as to achieve the purpose of continuous viewing by urban viewers. The construction of the rural landscape on short videos and the dissemination of rural culture in the media is in fact a social communication process in which a variety of meaningful rural symbolic forms are created, understood, or used, in which reality is produced, maintained, modified, and transformed, and the viewer shapes a unique image of the countryside in his or her mind, James W. Carey's theory is more proof of this [11]. One of the more important aspects of this is the role of rural symbols in short rural videos. Yihang Zhao argues that symbols are perceptions that are perceived to carry meaning, and their use is to express meaning [12]. Ferdinand de Saussure moreover, divides symbols into two connotations, the able and the referent [13]. Like Charles Sanders Peirce, it is also by taking into account the connection between the sign and the external object that the sign is divided into three parts: representamen, object, and interpretant. Symbols also mean that they can carry cultural connotations, which viewers are more likely to interpret as more subjective [14]. That is to say, for the rural video, the rural symbol is the symbolic expression of the natural environment, living customs, history, culture, and social relations of the countryside, as well as a true record of the general way of life and the state of living in the countryside that has been formed after a long period of accumulation. More importantly, it provides the creators with the possibility of utilizing multiple visual symbols to micro-reconstruct rural life. Creators use symbols to shape culture, and audiences use symbols to re-understand rural culture.

The above scholars' theoretical studies serve as the basis of the research and support us in further thinking. This study is to explore the role of symbols in the construction of the Chinese countryside

on China's short-video media platforms, and the reasons why short-video creators of the countryside choose these symbols to shape their expressions. This is because, in previous studies, few scholars have focused their perspectives on short video platforms to discuss the ways in which rural creators construct images of the countryside and to analyze the specific rural symbols used by the creators. This study will analyze the creators' viewpoints and designs of the image of the Chinese countryside on short video platforms through "Zhang", one of the most representative examples of short videos on Chinese short video platforms about rural culture. In this way, the study can further see the connotations of the symbol of the countryside on the Chinese Internet platform and the understanding of the Chinese countryside by some Chinese viewers. In this paper, the study will analyze the symbols used by the creator of "Zhang" in the short video, further analyze the special "picture of China's countryside" in the viewers' eyes, and through the viewers' understanding of the symbols of the countryside, to further explore the background of the countryside culture and the use of the symbols of the countryside in the new media culture.

3. Methodology

This paper analyzes the picture of the countryside shaped by "Zhang" and the cultural meaning it embodies. Therefore, the research object of this paper is the various kinds of symbols appearing in "Zhang's" videos. Through studying 186 works posted by "Zhang" on Dou Yin, The study take the videos with high heat and high feedback from viewers as the key objects of research, and then the study analyze the application of symbols appearing in "Zhang's" videos. On this basis, in order to conduct a more in-depth study, this study chose a representative Douyin account "Zhang", as a specific sample case to be analyzed.

4. Results

Through the use and combination of symbols, the expression of short video creators is displayed in front of viewers through videos, attracting different attention to watch and appreciate, strengthening their respective identities, and constructing distinctive images of villages. Based on Ferdinand de Saussure's symbolic forms, symbolic objects, and symbolic interpretations to study and analyze the symbols that often appear in "Zhang's" videos, and further define the symbolic forms in "Zhang's" videos into three types for research, classifying them as object symbols, natural symbols, and sound symbols, which are defined in three dimensions from the rural culture at the same time and analyze further the shaping of the rural landscape by these unique audio-visual symbols in the rural short videos [15].

Object symbols: Object symbols are symbolic representations of farmers' food, clothing, and shelter in the countryside. In the videos he creates, "Zhang" carefully selects objects that represent the memory markers of the countryside. Each video contains hundreds of physical symbols, including old hanging flower curtains, ancient black cotton shoes, red flower quilts, green buckwheat pillows, old gourd scoops, large water tanks, special washbasins for the countryside, calendars that can be chanted and torn, fireplaces, and old wooden sliding closets, Peeling wallpaper, old VCDs on the table, floral bedsheets and old curtains, long deformed aluminum tubs used in the house, Wahaha and so on. These specific symbols carry the memories and imaginations of most viewers. Just as floral bed sheets and curtains were the most common style in most homes in the countryside in the past, VCDs were a common way for people to watch images when the Internet was not developed. Wahaha was one of the few "popular" beverages when people were young. In the short video, "Zhang" utilizes the technique of close-up shooting to highlight the use of object symbols. Moreover, from his behavior, viewers can see the unique cultural memory of the countryside.

Natural symbols: Natural symbols are the cultural symbols that farmers combine nature and humanity in their rural culture. The natural environments featured in “Zhang’s” videos are farmland, woods and streams, marketplaces, and untouched country roads. “Zhang” can raise chickens and lay eggs in his own rural courtyard, dig cellars to store vegetables, and go fishing in the creek. His daily life truly restores the natural environment of a traditional village and constructs a culture of life unique to the countryside.

Sound symbols: video of “Zhang” retains the natural sounds of the original video soundtrack, such as creaking doors and windows, the sound of pounding corn, and the sound of vigorously chopping vegetables. These unique rural cultural characteristics of the sound symbols are used to support the visual symbols, to bring the audience a more realistic and vivid image of the countryside to present the effect. In addition, in rural short videos, creators often use local dialects to narrate their stories, conveying farmers’ love of life through simple and plain language expressions. “Zhang” is a native of Yingkou, Liaoning, China, and his video soundtrack has a strong northeastern Chinese accent. Like “Ga Rou” which means chopping meat, “RE Rao” and “Re Shu”, are specific titles given to the character in a video, bringing the on-screen character closer to the viewer.

5. Discussion

“Zhang” creates unique cultural symbols and combines his works to form a stable image label. Relying on the natural environment of the countryside in the rural culture video, set specific and subtle small themes and small stories around the most real-life scenes in the countryside, such as cooking, catching fish, sweeping snow, etc., and through the first perspective on the storytelling, the use of symbols to maximize the closeness to the traditional countryside and the general audience’s common life experience, triggering the audience’s resonance. These retros, contrasting audio-visual elements represent unique rural cultural symbols, and the placement of objects with northeastern characteristics in the video, the simple living habits shown, the natural green countryside scenery, and the accented rural dialect all demonstrate the real environment of the countryside and the villagers’ simple and lively attitude towards life. It is because of the appearance of these iconic symbols that emphasizes the public’s awareness of rural culture, shows the dissemination of rural culture by villagers in the context of urbanization, and triggers the audience’s emotional resonance while deepening the public’s memory.

Just as the use of object symbols not only reflects the changes that have occurred in farmers’ lives with the development of the times but also contains the rural culture that has been passed down from generation to generation, these symbols speak of a common meaning in different scenarios and have been passed down from generation to generation by the villagers. “Zhang’s” main location was an old house left behind by his grandfather, where peeling earth walls, posters on the wall, old TVs, DVD players, and cooking stoves with wood fires create an “old country scene”, blurring the boundaries between eras in the short video by using these age-old symbols, and helping people to revert back to the 1980s and 1990s by using the sense of history that the old objects bring with them.

Specific object symbols have even more special symbolic memories. “Zhang” uses close-ups in his images, and each shot highlights and zooms in on the symbols of the objects in an attempt to bring the viewer into the culture of the countryside. The gourd-made water-containing tools, old-fashioned beds and old room layouts, outdated furniture decorations, cracked concrete floors, coal-burning stoves, and red washbasins with joyful characters that appear in his videos are all symbols of the countryside that cannot be seen in relation to modern city life. Behind these symbols are references to the countryside living conditions of the traditional era, which were dilapidated, but the objects and so on had the principle of pragmatism. Like the gourd-made water-containing tool, which does not have a smooth exterior or beautifully carved design, but can meet the need for a large portion of water, the symbols of the object utensils represent the material life in the rural culture. In modern urban

society, the function of the gourd-made water-containing tool has been replaced by the water pipe, and people no longer use traditional household items such as red basins and coal-burning stoves. Therefore, the video of “Zhang” evokes the viewers’ memories of the countryside through the use of this old-fashioned tool, which is a symbol with a strong sense of recognition. Like the often-instrumental symbols, such as the dark ladle, the vat of water, the floral quilt, the shoe that hides the key on the window sill, and the stone used to block the door, they are all vivid symbols of rural culture, which are used by the creators to connect the viewers with the emotional connection to the rural life. And symbols of the type of food that can evoke memories of the countryside. Zhang helped the audience to recall their childhood taste memories through the symbolic memory points of food of the generation, such as San Xian Yi Noodle, Wahaha, AD Calcium Milk, and Crispy Noodles. Therefore, the short video of rural culture is fused and reorganized through unique and interesting cultural symbols, creating the rural life scene that the audience aspires to again in the fragmented narrative, and restoring the real appearance of rural life to the maximum extent.

The natural symbols represent a rural culture that is very different from the landscape presented by modern cities with tall buildings and a wide range of commodities. Under the natural symbols are blue sky and white clouds, green hills and trees, fields and ancient towns and courtyards, which are the natural environment in the countryside short videos; The nature symbols map the difference between the cultural concepts of consumerism and simple living while expressing the pleasant, healthy nature of the countryside scenery. Viewers begin to imagine traditional village life by watching the video of “Zhang”, and gradually develop a longing for unexplored and unspoiled natural landscapes. On the one hand, the content of the video “Zhang’s” makes the rural environment in the video very real through the visual layout of the rural space, on the other hand, these symbols with specific meanings will let the viewers express their feelings through objects, and the viewers’ different experiences will give these symbols a deeper connotation according to different needs of the individuals, so that they can get reminded of some of the experiences related to the rural culture when they are watching the video. As the young generation, most of them have been living in an intelligent and industrialized modern environment since they were born, and the video of “Zhang” makes use of such natural symbols to construct the young generation’s imagination of the countryside. They like to watch short videos of the countryside because they fulfill both the modern people’s yearning for being able to return to nature and their emotional need for tranquility and harmony.

The sound symbol is to make the video appear more natural, more belonging to the countryside sound, whether it is the animal’s call sound or farming under the labored sound, these sounds under the natural countryside in the usual and vivid sound. At the same time, the colloquial expression of the main character “Zhang” in the video is also more relevant to the public in terms of rural culture. Short videos on rural culture utilizing dialects can evoke the emotional resonance of peasant groups working outside the country or people who have moved to the cities, and bring the creators and viewers closer together.

The combination and use of these symbols not only enriches the audio-visual language of the video but also attracts the audience to watch and understand it. In the video “Zhang”, these rural symbols are integrated into a specific theme, showing the precious memories that the countryside brings to the viewers. The video of “Zhang” demonstrates the realization of the content of the communication, utilizing a complete narrative system and three-dimensional narrative themes to richly present a vivid portrait of the farmers. By combining fragments of “Zhang’s” daily life and the subjective design of the characteristic fragments, a warm and simple rural story is created. The narrative shows the authenticity and completeness of the story as much as possible, utilizes the cultural symbols of the countryside, and draws the distance between the countryside and the public closer with detailed descriptions.

Just like in the video “Brothers’ Tofu”, Ertao and “Zhang” teamed up to deliver the soaked soybeans to the uncle’s house for grinding, and after the electric car ran out of power on the way, the two of them helped each other and worked together to finally succeed in making the tofu together, showing the state of life of the traditional countryside locality from the details of their lives. In this video, “Steamy Day”, hundreds of shots are quickly grouped together to tell the story of “Zhang” making noodles, buying vegetables and meat, mixing meat, rolling out dough, making dumplings, and building a fire to eat from various perspectives and viewpoints, recreating the warm and precious memories of the traditional countryside winter festivals where relatives and friends sit around and make dumplings together. In this episode of Winter Solstice Sunset Dumpling Feast, folks in the village who are familiar with Zhang are invited to work, make dumplings, eat dumplings, and celebrate the winter solstice with him. The atmosphere of folks eating home-cooked food and talking and laughing brings warmth to the winter solstice, an ordinary Chinese holiday, and implies the meaning of being together as a family. These combined audio-visual symbols show the state of the countryside from the perspective of the villagers, integrating the subjective emotions and life experiences of the villagers into the video, showing the rural culture and the audience’s desire for a warm reunion. It fully demonstrates the comfortable, harmonious and harmonious atmosphere of village life and the positive and optimistic attitude of the villagers.

Rural culture is perceived as a “constructed scene”, and the presentation of rural culture in short videos creates two opposing emotions - “love for the countryside” and “boredom with the countryside”. One aspect of this is that the subject of simple and easy country life will make viewers interested in and nostalgic for the beauty of rural culture. From the other aspect, the short video dissemination has also appeared in the old-fashioned, backward type of contrasting to the countryside subject, which is not the same as the real countryside situation, so the viewers are tired of the countryside that has not changed. The famous communication scholar McLuhan once made the assertion that “the media is the Massage”, emphasizing the impact of media use on the audience’s physical and mental emotions, the use of the media is like enjoying emotional calming, this kind of appeasement is comfortable, pleasurable, and this situation is manifested as a kind of emotional experience, that is, the function of emotional calming [16]. One of the important reasons why the video of “Zhang” has attracted a lot of attention is that it satisfies the public’s need for “emotional massage” and helps the audience to get a pleasant and comfortable feeling in their spirit.

Compared with the life in the city, the real life in the countryside is more comfortable and free. However, “real” is not the ultimate value, and this study hope to present the vibrant countryside to the audience from the original environment and the writing of real stories. The accumulation and combination of one detail, focusing on the transformation of the countryside from poverty to picturesque rural life, shows a natural picture of rural life, real countryside scenes, and tells interesting stories of rural life, which are delivered to the audience through short videos. The essence of rural culture video lies more in the content of the emotional transfer, simple and easy environment presents a more complete and natural state of rural life, the expression of simple and rustic emotions, with simple filming techniques to cause a greater degree of emotional resonance of the audience to achieve the emotional reach of rural culture video, but also through the expression of these symbols to stimulate the viewer’s emotional identity of the countryside, triggering their yearning for the countryside.

As these symbols that can be accepted and understood by the public are more capable of realizing the acceptance and construction of the rural cultural image, many creators will adopt the inherent symbols in constructing the image of the countryside and will construct an unchanging image of the countryside in the short rural video, so as to realize the audience’s recognition of the rural video. But this will present a short video of the countryside presenting a stereotyped and one-sided image of the countryside. For creators, commercial metrics such as traffic and follower counts have become

important considerations in content creation, and creators only superficially record changes in their neighborhoods without being able to paint a complete picture of the rural landscape. For the audience, the inherent image of the countryside will only intensify their inherent perception of the countryside, thus overlooking the fact that the countryside is gradually beginning to become more advanced, environmentally sound, and economically productive. This will only deepen people's inherent image of the countryside without seeing a complete countryside.

6. Conclusion

On the premise that new media play a very big role in the dissemination of rural culture and the construction of rural image. How to make better use of symbols to create a truer and richer picture of the countryside and further disseminate rural culture has become a more important topic of discussion in the dissemination of rural culture at present. Audiovisual symbols can influence the presentation of the meaning of video content, and different symbols carry different meanings with their own unique values, presenting a unique cultural picture in short videos. Creators and viewers interact with each other, and creators create more popular country videos based on viewer preferences; The viewer, due to the creator's use of special symbols in the video, constructs in his own mind an image of the countryside formed by the short video of the countryside. Among them, the symbol plays an irreplaceable role for creators and viewers. It influences the viewers' perception of rural culture on the short video platform as a carrier of meaning as well as meaning interpreted by others. Understanding the importance of symbols in short videos about the countryside, "Zhang" has attracted a large number of viewers by utilizing a large number of rural symbols in its videos. Rural symbols are presented in a variety of forms in the videos of "Zhang", thus realizing the construction of the image of the countryside in the videos "Zhang". Therefore, during the communication of rural culture as an important symbol of the countryside, its significance in short videos cannot be limited to attracting attention but should follow the spirit of the Internet of openness, equality, rationality, and sharing, treating the users with truthfulness, and rigorously applying every symbol, every combination, to construct the image of the countryside in an objective and profound way.

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