Homeland and Foreign Land: Metaphorical Expression of Landscape in Rural Documentaries

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Abstract: The term “xiangtu” (native soil) constitutes a signifier with dual connotations. It not only denotes the tangible grassroots space of Chinese society, but also embodies the emotional and cultural roots of Chinese geo-social communities. Since the 20th century, urban-rural integration has reconstructed the traditional rural social structure, endowing the concept of native soil with profound elegiac implications between homeland and foreign land. On this basis, creators of rural documentaries incorporate subjective intentions into landscape presentation. Through rational artistic creation and processing, subjectivized emotions including passion for traditional farming labor, pursuit of homeland belonging, and rational contemplation on foreign land experience are carried by poetic and nostalgic symbolic carriers, thereby constructing a unique utopian rural landscape.
Key words: homeland; foreign land; landscape; rural documentary

Introduction

In the perspective of cultural anthropology, rural landscape can be regarded as the concrete manifestation of regional patterns of life on the land, continuously changing with the historical process. For a long time, China’s traditional agricultural civilization, bound by blood ties and clans, shaped a social formation of attachment to the native land and living together in clans. Since the 20th century, the modernization process has dissolved the traditional agricultural economic model, so that the term “native soil”, on top of its original spatial reference, has acquired an additional elegiac meaning interwoven with homeland and foreign land, as well as the constructive force that continues the rural cultural lineage through destruction and rebuilding. As far as rural documentaries are concerned, the landscape they present incorporates the creator’s subjective ideas, so its meaning is no longer limited to a simple reproduction of local scenery. Attachment to the land, remembrance of the native place and the search for a spiritual homeland, through the creator’s rational screening and artistic processing, are ultimately condensed into a utopian rural image. Such metaphorical imagery is “an illusion constructed by perceptual visibility, whose existence is supported by appearance and whose external display forms are various images. More importantly, the presence of the spectacle is a concealment of the true existence of society” [1]. Different documentaries present markedly different landscape meanings, which can roughly be presented along three paths: the first, driven by topophilia, returns to the original state of free labor; the second confronts the hidden ailments of rural civilization and constructs a scarred landscape full of confusion and sorrow; the third, with modern market logic empowering traditional agricultural civilization, shows a thriving new rural scene. This paper intends to explore the metaphorical expression of landscape in rural documentaries and its cultural implications from three dimensions: “pursuing the homeland”, “decoding the foreign land” and “reconstructing the countryside”.

1. Pursuing the Homeland: Utopian Landscape

“‘Homeland’ refers to the original place, the place of ancestral lineage” [2]. The pursuit of the homeland in rural

documentaries is essentially an image practice of spiritual home-returning. Creators detach the countryside from the real context and, through poetic and aesthetic image strategies, reshape it into a spiritual home carrying emotion and ideals. This process originates both from the individual's deep attachment to the land and is accomplished through paths such as labor, topophilia and nostalgia, ultimately condensing into a utopian rural landscape.

1.1 Labor: Returning to the Spiritual Soil

The expansion of industrialized production has increasingly separated human labor from life. The cold mechanized assembly lines and lengthy monotonous production activities in the social landscape suppress people's self-development and free creation, prompting a desire to escape from work. Yet in leisure time outside work, the symptoms of consumerism appear, presenting a disordered and inverted world of desire symbols, so that people lose their sense of wholeness and freedom in the cycle of "forced labor—compensatory consumption". This modern experience gives rise to a collective nostalgia for pre-industrial agricultural life. Lefebvre's "total man" precisely points to the state of existence in agricultural society in which need, labor and pleasure are unified. The writing of labor in rural documentaries is an image summons to this original state.

Such writing takes two forms. One is the poetic expression of the spirit of labor in traditional documentaries. The Last Mountain God tells of the hunting life of the couple Meng Jinfu after their return to the mountains and forests, unfolding a picture of harmonious coexistence between Oroqen civilization and the natural ecology; A Bite of China revolves around dietary activities, from obtaining ingredients to cooking and enjoying them, with every link imbued with Eastern wisdom of life; The Miracle of Chinese Grain outlines more than seventy years of change in agricultural production from a national perspective, turning the harvest scene into a visual symbol of national spirit. Although these works draw on different materials, they all reproduce in their images the original state in which labor and pleasure are unified, enabling viewers to gain spiritual resonance through aesthetic experience.

The second is the aesthetic reconstruction of labor in rural short videos. Li Ziqi's series of videos transform daily farming into a poetic labor aesthetics through exquisite and condensed camera language, objectified field life and textured sound production, enabling audiences together with the creator to return to the beauty of "labor" in the rural landscape; "Dianxi Xiaoge" selects life fragments such as planting, gathering and cooking to construct a self-sufficient pastoral picture. Labor in such short videos is highly aestheticized, conveying the beautiful labor spirit of self-sufficiency in the countryside and the wisdom of villagers in following the seasons, presenting a pastoral work scene and satisfying urban audiences' imaginative need for free labor and a complete life.

1.2 Topophilia: Emotional Attachment to the Land

"Yi-Fu Tuan's theory of topophilia reveals the complex emotional bond between humans and the environment; its core lies in the fact that humans endow space with meaning through perception, attitude and values, thereby forming a deep attachment to a particular 'place'" [3]. In the Chinese cultural tradition, land has never been merely a material resource but a carrier of blood ties, ethics and spiritual belonging. From the folk ethic of "attachment to the native land and reluctance to move" to the timeless lament "a youth leaves home, an old man returns", all reflect the Chinese people's deep emotional attachment to the land. This attachment constitutes the internal drive for rural documentaries to pursue the homeland.

Many creators of rural documentaries themselves carry this topophilia. They were often born in villages and grew up in the fields, then left home for study or livelihood, and their wandering experience made their affection for the native land even stronger. This emotion constitutes the original motivation of their creation and also determines the emotional tone of the rural landscape in their images. Days in the Mountains takes the painter Luo Zhongli's return to the Daba Mountains as its narrative thread and unfolds a picture of rural life through his perspective. Luo Zhongli is both the narrator of the film and the emotional projection of the creator; his act of returning home is itself a concrete expression of topophilia. Through his presence, the film interweaves personal memory with collective memory, making rural space a poetic field carrying emotional belonging. Swimming Out Until the Sea Turns Blue likewise has a distinct topophilic character. Through oral accounts by several writers, the film links the history of change in rural society; those dreamlike

image fragments — white shirts hanging in dilapidated courtyards, small boats floating in candlelight, farmers reading in the fields — are all poetic reconstructions of memories of the native land. Through these images the creators complete a spiritual return home, transforming topophilia into a perceivable image landscape.

2. Decoding the Foreign Land: Scarred Landscape

In the modernization process, large-scale population mobility forcibly severed the geographical bond between individuals and their native land, and a sense of wandering and identity anxiety followed. When those who left home try to return to their hometown, the ways of thinking and values shaped by life in the foreign land have made it difficult for them to truly reintegrate into the original rural order; meanwhile, those who stay in the city cannot be fully accepted by the city because of the rural cultural qualities they carry. This two-way predicament constitutes a scar hard to heal in rural imagery. By decoding this scarred landscape, rural documentaries reveal individuals' identity predicament and spiritual wandering under the impact of modernity. The following analysis addresses two aspects: the identity predicament of returnees and the spiritual predicament of wanderers.

2.1 The Identity Predicament of Returnees

When people baptized by modern civilization return to rural space, they often fall into an identity crisis. Such foreign-land landscapes often appear inside the countryside, manifesting as the alienation and estrangement between individuals and the rural environment. In China in the Countryside, one of the protagonists, the college student Du Bincai, grew up in a single-parent family, and his feelings about "home" are intense and complex. Another protagonist, Du Shenzhong, neglects the family orchard in pursuit of spiritual fulfillment and lives in economic hardship, so he is always wandering between ideal and reality. Although they are physically in the countryside, their ways of thinking and values have been changed by modern civilization and education, making them "outsiders" incompatible with the village; yet they find it hard to gain identity recognition, presenting a state of "strangers in their own village". Part Three, "Hometown", of Factory Youth records the scene of young migrant workers returning home for the Spring Festival: the protagonist A Jian's awkwardness before his relatives and his estrangement from traditional customs vividly present the individual's divergence from the countryside. In these images, people originally born in the countryside become "wandering souls" upon returning, and rural space instead becomes the backdrop that highlights their heterogeneous existence. This rural picture full of paradox is precisely a profound manifestation of the scar of the foreign land.

2.2 The Spiritual Predicament of Wanderers

Another type of foreign-land landscape focuses on the survival and psychological state of those who left home in urban space. Such landscapes can be grasped at two levels: spiritual and geographical. From the spiritual level, a hometown that no longer exists creates a void in the soul, making people constantly recall the native land in the foreign land. Swimming Out Until the Sea Turns Blue re-examines the rural imprint in a different time and space, using scenes with a sense of temporal flow such as streets, canteens and railway stations to create a nostalgic atmosphere and achieve a retrospective of the native land. These foreign-land scenes are not simple spatial records but carry the wanderers' continuous longing for the native land, becoming a visual representation of spiritual wandering. From the geographical level, the foreign-land picture presents the survival predicament of those who find it hard to integrate into the city. Simmel once pointed out that the stranger "does not belong to the group from the very beginning", and introduces foreign qualities into the group. The young and middle-aged people who moved into cities amid the wave of modernization are typical representatives. Factory Youth records the dilemma of this group of young people: staying in the city means enormous economic pressure, while returning to the countryside leaves their aspirations unfulfilled. A countryside one cannot return to and a city one cannot remain in constitute a foreign-land picture full of contradictions. Through in-depth excavation of the inner world of factory youth, the film elevates this double wandering, geographical and spiritual, to the height of rational reflection, endowing the scarred landscape with profound social critical power.

3. Reconstructing the Countryside: Symbiotic Landscape

If pursuing the homeland and decoding the foreign land correspond respectively to the utopian landscape and the scarred landscape, then with the advancement of the rural revitalization strategy, a third landscape form has begun to appear in rural documentaries: the symbiotic landscape of reconstructing the countryside. This landscape no longer regards homeland and foreign land as two diametrically opposed poles, but attempts to present a new rural picture of integration and symbiosis amid the interweaving of tradition and modernity, countryside and city, memory and reality.

The generation of the symbiotic landscape first stems from the reconstruction of rural space in rural revitalization practice. Driven by policy, "presenting rural features in the form of documentaries can not only inherit and protect traditional culture, but also vividly record the changes of the era with the language of the lens" [4]. When the Melons Ripen takes Shaanxi villages as its background and records the process by which farmers develop characteristic industries and escape poverty under policy support. The film not only records the story of traditional crops leaving the countryside but also incorporates intangible cultural heritage such as Qinqiang opera and paper-cutting; The Miracle of Chinese Grain, meanwhile, presents from the level of national narrative a picture of technology-driven agriculture and smart agriculture, in which traditional farming wisdom and modern technological means enter into dialogue in the images, showing the active reconstruction of the countryside in the modernization process. On this basis, rural space is no longer a closed utopia, nor a scarred foreign land, but a symbiotic field full of vitality and tension.

The symbiotic landscape is also reflected in the creators' transcendence of the binary framework of homeland and foreign land. In such documentaries, the countryside is no longer simply beautified as a spiritual pure land, nor unidirectionally presented as backward and benighted, but restored as a dynamic and complex living entity. Creators examine rural change with a rational yet warm gaze, facing squarely the pain brought by the impact of modernity while capturing the rebirth inspired by the countryside's endogenous dynamics. In Days in the Mountains, the painter Luo Zhongli returns to the Daba Mountains and sees both traces of past poverty and the changes in infrastructure improvement and cultural revival; his return is no longer mere nostalgia but participatory observation and construction. Similarly, Amazing Villages, while recording traditional villages on the verge of disappearing, also shows the efforts of the younger generation to return home and start businesses, continuing the rural cultural lineage in new ways, so that nostalgia is no longer passive mourning but a positive constructive force.

The core of the symbiotic landscape lies in the word "symbiosis", which points to the interdependent and mutually enabling relationship between people and land, tradition and modernity, homeland and foreign land. In this landscape, labor is neither a romanticized poetic dwelling nor an alienated struggle for survival, but a practice in which individuals realize self-worth in rural reconstruction; nostalgia is neither mere nostalgia nor an unhealable scar, but an emotional resource driving rural cultural innovation. Through images, creators of rural documentaries transform the contradictions, explorations and hopes in the process of rural revitalization into a new metaphorical expression, so that audiences not only gain emotional comfort but also generate rational thinking and imaginative action regarding the future of the countryside.

From the above analysis it is not difficult to find that the rapid development of industrialization has not only brought about the alienation of production and life styles but also changed the rural structure dominated by blood relations, putting traditional rural space and folk culture at risk of disappearance. Creators of rural documentaries redraw the rural world in their consciousness with image technology: driven by topophilia and nostalgia, they attach the spirit of labor and nostalgic elements to rural carriers, creating a utopian rural landscape to repair the psychologically diffuse state of the public; with a sober gaze they decode the scar of the foreign land, presenting the identity predicament and spiritual wandering in the interweaving of homeland and foreign land; and in the context of rural revitalization they attempt to reconstruct the countryside, constructing a new landscape in which tradition and modernity, homeland and foreign land coexist. Seen in this light, the metaphorical expression of landscape in rural documentaries contains creators' anxiety and concern about the countryside, reflects people's longing for the original state of existence and their nostalgia and attachment to traditional rural space, and also embodies the spiritual aspirations of the new era for a free homeland and rural revitalization.

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