Reclaiming the Periphery in the Age of Social Media: Power and Narrative of Rural China in My People, My Homeland (2020) and Coffee or Tea? (2020)

Weiwei Lu
Southeast University, China

Han Li
Rhodes College, USA

Abstract
China’s industrial development and accompanying urbanization since the 1970s established an urban-rural power dichotomy. However, in recent years, this “urban-rural” as “center-periphery” binary has been constantly re-examined and re-imagined. The emergence of rural short videos since 2016 has arguably led the “voices” of periphery to be heard. However, along with these seemingly heteroglossic and de-centralizing narratives of rural China, it is also observed that the state seeks to reclaim the ownership of rural storytelling. This paper looks into My People, My Homeland (2020) and Coffee or Tea? (2020) and examines how these two (quasi-) “main melody” films depict rural revitalization in the social media age. By unpacking the two films’ narrative strategies in portraying Chinese countryside as well as the intertextual relations they form with other macro cinematic texts and micro grassroot storytelling of the “periphery,” this article demonstrates how the state re-establishes the discursive power in representing and interpreting the countryside.

Keywords
China, rural area, main melody film, center and periphery, power

Corresponding author:
Han Li, Department of Modern Languages and Literatures, Rhodes College, Southwester Hall 118, Memphis, TN, USA.
Email: hanl@rhodes.edu

Creative Commons Non Commercial CC BY-NC: This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 License (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) which permits non-commercial use, reproduction and distribution of the work without further permission provided the original work is attributed as specified on the SAGE and Open Access pages (https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/open-access-at-sage).
Introduction

The visibility of rural China in Chinese media representation has gradually changed during the post-socialist time. Viewed as the backbone of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), rural China held a quite visible presence, especially in state (-endorsed) media channels and other mediums (such as news reports and TV dramas) since the 1970s. From 1980s to mid-1990s, TV dramas telling rural stories were an important entertainment source for Chinese domestic audiences, and in the international artistic arena, a majority of the fifth-generation cinema that gained international recognition were also rural-themed (Xue, 2018; Yang, 2017; Zhou et al., 2021). As an agrarian country, rural areas in Chinese TV and cinema not only serve to document the country’s socio-economic transformations but also reflect intellectuals’ interpretations of the country’s past and present (Zhang, 2019). Yet, both general audiences and academia observed that peasant characters have been disappearing from the country’s big and small screens since the late 1990s (Chen, 2016; Yan, 2019). In 2015, there were just 15 rural-situated TV series, representing just 3.81% of the year’s television production volume/quantity (an historic low), while 139 urban-situated titles accounted for 35.28% of productions (Zhang, X., 2019). Urbanization, modernity discourse, developmentalist logic, capital influence, and (urban) viewers’ taste changes (especially following the importation of Hollywood films to China), as scholars argue, have all led to diminished production of rural-themed TV and films in China (Xie, 2016; Xue, 2018; Yan, 2019; Zhang, 2015).

While rural China seems to have lost its appeal in certain traditional media formats, it has made an unexpected resurgence in other popular culture productions. Although rural-themed TV production has been declining, reality shows set in the countryside have garnered unprecedented popularity (Morrow, 2019; Wen, 2019). Groundbreaking forerunners such as Hunan Satellite TV’s (HSTV), X-Change series (Bianxing ji, 2006–2019), and the Where Are We Going, Dad? series (Baba qu na’er? 2013–2017), where the countryside serves as an educational (if not testing) venue contrasting urban-rural differences, have captivated audiences, garnered impressive viewership totals, and generated a number of subsequent spin-offs. Many of these “rural experiencing” programs typically send celebrities into a rural wilderness and capitalize on the urban participants’ awkwardness and frustration as they try to survive a chain of (staged) physical challenges and cultural clashes (Morrow, 2019). Accompanying such reality shows, the explosive growth of video-sharing and live streaming social media platforms such as Kuaishou and Douyin (China’s TikTok) have also contributed to mass-producing rural microcelebrities and returning rural China and small-towns to the public spotlight. Though questions and opinions regarding the “authenticity” of the countryside in such videos vary widely (Lin & de Kloet 2019), these rural stories continue to gain considerable attention on mobile screens. Attention to Chinese countryside also featured a high point on the big screen in 2020 during China’s National Day holiday week. Annually one of the prime exhibition windows for the Chinese film market in the new millennium, two films featuring the Chinese countryside, My People, My Homeland (Wo he wode jiaxiang, Ning Hao et al., 2020; hereafter as My Homeland) and Coffee or Tea? (Yidian jiu daojia, Derek Hui, 2020), generated not only impressive box office yields, but also attracted substantial acclaim from both critics and general audiences alike.

Several aspects about the exhibition time and filmic successes are noteworthy. First, given its tremendous social-political significance, the National Day holiday week (usually October 1–7) is not an exhibition window solely subject to industrial maneuvering. In recent decades, films delivering “main melody” values have been prioritized with the expectation of maximizing both viewership and impacts on “national image branding” (Liu, 2021). In other words, securing the holiday week window itself speaks volume of the social-political weight that a film premiering...
during this time is deemed to carry. Second, these two films differ considerably in their production scales, directorial styles and structures with one backed by a team of the country’s most acclaimed directors while the other comes from a budding Hong Kong director and a young, unheralded cast. Despite these differences, the two films share striking similarities both in their main themes and in the social-political values they signal to the public. Respectively, telling stories of “going (back) to the rural homes,” I contend that both films demonstrate how the center is discursively re-establishing a new narrative regarding the relationship between the center and the periphery, especially when viewed against the booming grassroots “we-media” (zimeiti) voices (Fang, 2022). By examining the social-political context and the narrative details of these two films as well as the intertextual relations they form with related media texts, this article demonstrates how the two films offer a renewed mode of portraying, imagining, and interpreting the periphery.

The Center-Periphery Hierarchy and the Resurgence of the Periphery

Since the PRC’s establishment in 1949, rural areas have been constantly defined and revised according to their role in the country’s industrialization and modernization blueprint rather than in their own right or need (Gao & Fennell, 2018; Zhang, 2020). As socialist planning vowed to advance heavy industry, rural areas and the agrarian sector were positioned to supply the food and resources for industrial development. Consequently, under the guidelines of “rural supports cities, agriculture supports industry,” the state expropriated capital accumulation through agricultural taxes and price scissors between agricultural and industrial products during the socialist time (Zweig, 1990; Knight, 1995). Since Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, rural areas further contributed to China’s unprecedented industrialization and urbanization process by providing abundant land and a cheap labor force (Ban, 2018; Liu et al., 2017; Sun, 2014). The nationwide marshaling of resources toward the cities and extremely limited allocation of investment for rural development led to an array of challenges to the Chinese countryside, such as an ongoing brain drain, hollow villages, farmland abandonment, and a left-behind population (Biao, 2007; Liu et al., 2017; Zhang, 2001). Moreover, the divide established a center-periphery hierarchy between urban and rural areas where the cities became metonyms of progress and modernity while the rural is perpetually denigrated as poor and backward (Yeh et al., 2013).

However, as China’s economic and urban growth have begun to plateau, the state has increasingly redirected its attention to rural areas. Language and strategies regarding the reperceived rural-urban relations were announced and have been reinforced since the early 2000s (Zhang, 2019). For instance, the 4th and 5th Plenary Session of the 16th Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee (2004–2005) claimed that Chinese economic development has entered the phase of “industry nurturing agriculture and cities supporting the countryside” (yi gong cu nong, yi cheng dai xiang). In 2006, the Chinese government abolished agricultural taxes while also unveiling “Socialist New Countryside Construction” projects (shehui zhuyi xin nongcun), vowing to invest in infrastructure construction and increase rural resident incomes. The CCP’s 18th National Congress (2012) named “three rural problems” (sannong wenti, referring to agriculture, villages, and peasants) as fundamental to the country’s stability and people’s wellbeing, and efforts on these issues have held a central place on the Party’s work agenda. These initiatives culminated in 2017 when Xi Jinping announced the “Rural Revitalization Strategy” (xiangcun zhengxing zhanlue) during the CCP’s 19th National Congress, for the first time directly connecting the nation’s revival with rural revitalization, defining the latter as the next historical stage following the rural poverty alleviation campaign. This strategy also established the goal of reducing the urban-rural gap and achieving collective prosperity between 2020 and 2035. Subsequent campaign guidelines detailed
and reiterated the importance of developing digital infrastructure and e-commerce in rural areas. This series of policies and practices has been viewed as the party’s most significant strategic recalibration regarding the industry-agriculture/urban-rural relationship in the new development stage (Smith, 2018; Meyer-Clement, 2020; Zhang, 2019).

In looking retrospectively at the vicissitudes of state’s policies and attitudes toward the countryside, two elements of the “Rural Revitalization Strategy” language merit further elaboration, as they are pertinent to interpreting the two films. First, as scholars point out, the core goal of this plan is to promote the “modernization of agriculture and villages,” which is a new and updated expression (Wang & Su, 2017). Past rural development plans called for “modernization of agriculture” and are retrospectively viewed as lacking a holistic sense of rural area planning. However, the new initiative indicates that realization of the rural revitalization plan demands not only the modernization of agriculture, but also simultaneously that of the villages and peasants. In accordance with this principle, the revitalization strategy calls for building modernized rural areas that have “thriving businesses” (chanye xingwang), a “pleasant living environment” (shengtai yiju), “social etiquette and civility” (xiangfeng wenming), “effective governance” (zhili youxiao), and “prosperity” (shenghuo fiyu). The nuanced update and the newly listed criteria vowing to promote integrated urban-rural development are all timely reflected in the two films under discussion.

Second, the official introduction of “xiangcun” to replace “nongcun” in the party’s political lexicon, a change that cannot be adequately demonstrated in direct English translation, merits special examination. As a sociological construct, the concept of “nongcun” (lit. agriculture village) was introduced to China in the early 20th century and mainly referred to areas where agriculture served as the primary production means (Chen & Ji, 2020; Han, 2005). As Zhang (2020) points out, in both practice and in academic studies, the rural is “not merely as a geographic site, but also as an imaginary space, a discursive construct” (9). At different historical times throughout the long and tumultuous 20th century, the Chinese “nongcun” is granted different social-political connotations, especially in the Party’s official historiography; it is the base and origin of armed revolution, the battlefield of land reformation, the site for intellectual reeducation and the supplier of industrial labor force. In other words, “nongcun” in China was never an innocent reference to a geographical area, but rather a compounded social, political and economic signifier (Gao & Fennell, 2018; Zhang, 2020). While terms such as or nongcun or xiangtu (native soil), xiangcun (rural village) have been used to refer to the rural areas in the 20th century, “nongcun” has been the chosen term in the CCP’s official language. In the new millennium, as industrialization and urbanization extend to small towns and the rural areas, the word “nongcun” (with an established emphasis on agriculture production) is deemed to fall short of reflecting the new roles that the state’s restructured economic blueprint needs them to be, especially with the emergence of new identities such as “vocational village,” “tourist village,” and “e-commerce village” (Wang, 2001). The Party language change from “nongcun” to “xiangcun” therefore reflects that the state envisions “rural area” to go beyond a space defined by agrarian means toward one transformed into a package with residents, customs, lifestyles, and activities that are more diversified than “nongcun” (Zhang et al., 2018; Chen & Ji, 2020).

In fact, it is this “xiangcun,” a space going through both a physical transformation and a discursive redefinition, becomes a most favored stage for the reality shows, TV dramas, and films under discussion. This “xiangcun” is heterogeneous from the urban in landscape, atmosphere, and social-ethical relations. As a multi-dimensional space, it simultaneously functions for everyday living, carries social-political significance, performs cultural-custom references, and caters to nostalgic reimagination. The rural areas featured in the two films are not merely a singular geographical place, but rather a cultural space that fulfill these multiple and interconnected purposes.
Accompanying the complexity of the space, the cultural productions of this rural space have also become multiple. In the Chinese context, they mainly include top-down official narratives, commercial narratives conveyed through traditional media, and the newly emergent private narrative on social media. If the first two channels are relatively traditional, the third channel, fueled by the booming video-sharing and live broadcasting industry, has created a most unexpected and unconventional phenomenon on the Chinese internet, while also receiving multiple and contrasting interpretations. Some scholars celebrate the agency and creativity of rural content creators and consider this digitally-enabled, decentralizing rural storytelling a certain form of defiance toward the dominance of the official narrative while enabling visibility of the silenced peasants and the concealed countryside (Lin & de Kloet, 2019; Hou & Zhang, 2022). However, other scholars argue that these short videos, especially the ones that spectacle-ize and capitalize on the pitiful and uncultured aspect of rural areas, actually further stereotype and stigmatize rural images. Such content either voluntarily meets the expected horizon of urban consumers or wittingly reproduces the underclass (Li et al., 2019; Liu, 2018). However, despite contrasting interpretations regarding the roles and effect of such private narratives, the sheer presence of this dimension in the taxonomy of the media representations of the periphery entices an explicit response from the center and clearly affects the master narrative of the rural, as reflected in the two films.

Therefore, it is really against the synergy of the social-political imperatives, commercial motivations, and digital private storytelling that these two (quasi-) “main-melody” films portraying the periphery should be examined. How is the periphery viewed by the center in the social media age? How is this perception reflected in the cinematic languages and, in turn, further reinforced by these audiovisual languages? And what does this tell us about the interplay between power, narrative, and rurality? This article contends that these two films explore new possibilities of official narratives of the Chinese countryside, especially with the awareness of and the urge to respond to grassroots digital enablement. The new narrative seeks to reclaim the discursive dominance (if not hegemony) of literary storytelling of Chinese countryside. This revised paradigm re-produces a rural space and recolonizes the space where the “xiangcun” is only to be re-discovered in a new urban logic.

**Power in/and Narrative: The Visual Reconfiguration and Cultural Reimagination of the Periphery**

While the two films differ significantly in production scale and structure, *My Homeland* puts forth a grand narrative of rural advancements over the past decades, whereas *Coffee or Tea?* cleverly sells a microscopic, e-business entrepreneurial fantasy that appeals to millennials. Moreover, while *My Homeland* does not hide its propagandistic nature, *Coffee or Tea?* appears as an “innocent” commercial title. Despite these differences, consistent and shared narrative patterns regarding the countryside and center-periphery relations can be clearly gleaned from the texts and intertextual networks involving the two films. Such patterns prescribe a socio-spatial order serving the urban-centric logic.

The most substantial display of power on the textual level is that, although both works feature stories about the Chinese countryside, they are both told from a condescending, urban (center) perspective. Without exception, all of the plot level stories feature urbanites going (back) to the countryside. Among the five episodes in *My Homeland*, the first chapter (“A Beijing Good Person”) features Zhang Beijing, a slick and sly Beijinger, who plots a Medicare fraud to help his country bumpkin cousin who cannot afford a surgery in Beijing due to urban-rural medical benefit inequalities. The majority of the story ironically takes place in Beijing and the village does not enter narrative until Zhang Beijing visits his cousin’s home, only to be pleasantly surprised that the
healthcare situation has tremendously improved there. In the second episode (“A Mystery of UFO”), a mysterious UFO landing in a remote Guizhou village catches the attention of a Beijing journalistic team who venture there and discover that the UFO, which has made the ethnic village a sensational tourist destination, is actually a scam by a local internet microcelebrity. The third story (“The Last Class”) exerts a double external perspective on the countryside. In this episode, the protagonist Teacher Fan is a former urban-to-rural volunteer teacher who now resides in Smithland and suffers from Alzheimer’s disease (i.e., physically and mentally distanced from the countryside). In order to revive his memory, his son and a group of former students plan a “homecoming” trip to the village. As Teacher Fan returns from overseas and visits the village, which has been staged to be like 20 years ago in a childlike naiveté (both as a pathological mental situation and metaphor of rejuvenation), this episode brings viewers to an outlandish village across time and geographical boundary. The fourth installment (“The Way Back Home”) is a comedy where a successful female cyber influencer confronts who she believes to be a con artist on her homecoming trip only to find out the latter is actually a hero who has led the sand-control and poverty-alleviation campaigns of their hometown. In the last episode (“The Magical Touches”), a promising young urban artist gives up a competitive fellowship to study art in Russia in order to serve as the chief of a small satellite village seeking to develop a tourist economy.

The same “going back to the countryside” theme is repeated in Coffee or Tea? where two young men leave Beijing to go (back) to the remote but resourceful Yunnan village to exercise their entrepreneurial ideas. Wei Jinbei, a young urban opportunist who fails consecutively at his startups meets Peng Xiubing, a Yunnan migrant worker in Beijing convinced of the potentiality of a delivery business in his isolated hometown. The two of them, teaming up with the hermit-like Li Shaoqun, who, against his father’s (the village chief) will, determines to plant coffee in the village known for long history of cultivating tea. As the team overcomes their internal conflicts over an acquisition offer from an international coffee corporation and establishes their own (national) coffee brand, not only does their business take off, but Li Shaoqun also reconciles with his old-minded and stubborn but caring father.

In reviewing each film’s storylines, it is clear that both seek to present a new look at the Chinese countryside, places that are no longer poor, isolated or backward but instead have modern infrastructure, lively economic activities, and bright faces. The cinematography accompanying these refreshed looks either accents the unprecedented changes and cheerful sceneries or assists in serving to build a sense of both closeness and connection between viewers and the framed rurality. For example, in Coffee or Tea? as Wei Jinbei and Feng Xiubing travel back to Feng’s home village loaded with excitement and aspiration, breathtaking aviation shots cruise over the vast landscape, rows of modern wind turbines, newly-constructed highways and railroads, awing viewers with modern, yet under-appreciated infrastructure developments in the rural areas. While they are in the village, robust camera movements, (extra) close shots, use of high-contrasting colors and fast-editing all serve to engage and stimulate (young) viewers with appealing audiovisual rhythms (Figures 1 and 2). Interestingly, in the few years preceding the films, a number of “going back to the rural home” essays portraying some of the hard and destitute aspects of the countryside and rural-urban inequality went viral on Chinese social media. In 2019, the Party newspaper Guangming Daily released a series of commentaries subtly criticizing these “we-media” essays as “blind sighted” to the rural developments (“Women de xiangcun,” 2019). Labeling these writings (mostly written by intellectuals returning to their rural hometowns during traditional festivals) as “homecoming genre” (fanxiang ti), the official comments command that these writings offer more “constructive” thoughts for improving and representing the countryside rather than simply
criticizing the issues (“Wangyou qidai,” 2019). Viewed in this light, the two films’ going back stories are clearly signaling what “acceptable” and “correct” “homecoming genre” should be like.

However, despite how renewed and transformed the countryside appears, the representation of them is highly paradoxical in these two works. On one hand, it is apparent that the films seek to showcase different types of the new “xiangcun” that emerged. For example, in My Homeland, the five stories are meticulously orchestrated to showcase rural revitalization accomplishments in fields such as healthcare, technology advancement, education improvement, poverty alleviation, environmental governance, and economic development, demonstrating not only physical and economic changes in the periphery, but also cultural and spiritual changes. Viewers can even observe a precise correlation between the content of each episode and the state’s targeted goals and accomplishments as indicated in the aforementioned policies.

Yet, in contrast to the variety of the new “xiangcun,” these villages are also highly homogeneous, which, inadvertently testifies to the creators’ condescending, external perspectives. To begin with, My Homeland handpicks five villages (based in Beijing, Guizhou, Shaanxi, Zhejiang, and Liaoning), a clear ambition to provide a panoramic picture of rural revitalization across the country. But when it comes to individual cases, each place offers no more than the stereotypes usually associated with that region (Dai, 2020), showcasing both the singular understanding and the narrow perception these center-based directors have about the rural areas. In addition, the transformed villages also follow the same formula—they all have similarly beautiful lifestyles with updated infrastructure, postcard-like scenery, thriving economies (almost all of them are developing tourist businesses), a vibrant esprit de corps, and harmonious communal relationships. Moreover, a patterned cinematography (such as those discussed above) accompanying such formulistic content is repeatedly used (if not cliché) in every episode. As such, the stagnant and stereotyped depiction of the rural areas reduces the countryside to mere simplistic images, and approves only the singular value of developmentalist teleology (Figure 3).

However, while overtly celebrating some countryside changes, other aspects of the rural areas are conveniently left to “stay behind.” These what Anna Tsing (1993) would describe as “romance of

Figure 1. In the opening scene of “A Mystery of UFO,” the camera cruises over the vast landscape and showcases the newly-constructed bridge and highway, awing viewers with modern, yet under-appreciated infrastructure developments in the rural areas.
the primitive” moments serve not only as the raison d’etre for modernization but also perpetuate the “center-periphery” hierarchy. For example, in *Coffee or Tea?* when Wei Jinbei’s arrival at the tea village, the patriarchal ethics, the clannish culture and the backward medical and economic situations (such as using the folk remedy of treating a bee sting with cow saliva) not only provides viewers with an exotic spectacle, but also invokes implicit approvals of the need for change. Despite this ostentatious stereotyping, some of the backwardness is disguised in a romantic and nostalgic light to serve the center’s need and supremacy. In both films, the rural is the “hinterland” for spiritual healing and is emotional therapeutic to the frustrated and alienated humanities caused by senseless neo-liberal capitalism, especially in the cities. In *My Homeland*, the amnesia Teacher Fan can only

**Figure 2.** Similar content and cinematography can be seen in the opening of *Coffee or Tea?* where a wide angle, establishing shot shows a new country road along with modern wind turbines suggesting clean energy and environmental protection.

**Figure 3.** The setting of “The Last Class” is in a typical water town in Zhejiang Province whose postcard-like sceneries and modern village housing, respectively, meet the viewers’ expectation of a traditional but new village.
(temporarily) re-experience joy when he revisits the village, and in Coffee or Tea? Wei Jinbei, the goal-orientated and depressed urban elite that fails with consecutive psychiatric treatments, is miraculously healed (and he is finally able to drift into sleep) in the therapeutic countryside. These two films’ praise of the rural revitalization cannot change the fact that the functions of the periphery are still gauged by its ability to serve the needs of the center. Although both works celebrate the return of the youth to the countryside, the “xiangcun” in the two films, without exception, are transformed into the e-business sites and/or retreat venues for urbanites. In other words, the periphery is still a realm of extraction (especially for its resources) for the material and emotional needs of the center.

Beyond this, the subtest yet perhaps most powerful demonstration of power on the textual level is the action of “looking” and the external gaze bestowed on the rural areas that accompanies the plot of urbanites going to the countryside. In both films, the countryside is seen (and is only seeable) when the urbanites go to unveil (and demystify) the secluded and often forgotten land. Essentially, they are the doubtful urban residents whose old ideas about the countryside are dispelled, including the metropolitan news reporters who go to the periphery to investigate, the nostalgic intellectual who returns to seek roots, the successful cyber KOL who travels back for an alumni reunion, the altruistic urban artist who comes to educate, and the opportunistic dreamer who ventures for a new start. Individually and in sum, this “urban-seeing-rural” perspective demonstrates a ubiquitous “center-to-periphery” hierarchy throughout the narrative. Accompanying this perspective, the action and the materiality of “looking” (such as using all kind of cameras) are omnipresent in the stories. In “A Mystery of UFO,” the journalist team arrives in Dafu Village equipped head-to-toe to investigate and report, and this UFO fraud is accidently filmed by their professional camcorders (Figure 4). In “The Last Class” and “The Way Back Home,” the local villagers are always seen to be either attending to the urban tourists on site or marketing their local specialties in front of the cameras—in each case, constantly under the scrutiny of the center. In a scene meant to showcase touristic and ecommerce activities, a rural young woman dressed in period costume (further enhancing the feeling of theatricality) introduces local products to urban children visiting the village and, at the same time, live-broadcasts with six cellphone cameras capturing her from different angles. She is literally surrounded all-around by urban “gaze” (Figure 5). In Choong-Hwan Park’s study of nongjiale (delights in farm guesthouses) tourism, Park points out that the urbanite guests visit farm guesthouses to consume rustic food and lodging “that symbolize something quintessentially rural, familial, authentic, eco-friendly, healthy, and traditional” (Park, 2014, p. 519). Park also observes a paradox in the power relation between the “peasant hosts” and “urbanite guests” in this unique form of rural tourism. In this scene in “The Last Class” while this rural woman is the local host, she is under double security by both the urbanite viewers both on site and online. In “The Magical Touches,” the artist-turned-village chief has to constantly Facetime with his wife in a theatrical fashion (to convince her he is in Russia)—turning the village into a stage under the gaze of the urban viewers (Figure 6). In each of the stories, although it seems like people are going to or returning to the villages, the villages they are in are actually more of an imagined space produced for the vision and gaze of the center rather than a discrete geographical and physical space.

In addition to various center-periphery hierarchic displays at the textual level, the inter-textual contrasts are equally compelling. Both films, interestingly, have their own master text and should be understood within this context. My Homeland was made as a sequel to a most well-received main-melody hit, My People, My Country (Wo he wode zuguo, Ning Hao et al., 2019), which also was exhibited during the National Day week. Coffee or Tea? situates itself as a rural-version of Hong Kong veteran director Peter Chan’s highly-acclaimed blockbuster, American Dreams in China (Zhongguo
hehuo ren, 2009), as the latter also featuring the trials and tribulations of three young men’s entrepreneurship and friendship. Clearly, both master texts govern the sequels as they provide a grand historical and patriotic context which the latter two sequel films subjugate themselves to. To commemorate the PRC founding’s 70th anniversary, My People, My Country offers a nation-building saga chronicling in seven chapters the PRC’s achievements since 1949, including its founding, the development of the atomic bomb, the historic 1981 victories of the Chinese women’s volleyball team, the 1997 return of Hong Kong, the 2008 Beijing Olympics, the landing of Shenzhou-11 spacecraft and the military parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of the Victory of the War of Resistance. Echoing this “main melody” epic in structure and style, My
Homeland elevates the significance of the rural areas in the holistic picture of nationalist historiography. Yet, while My People, My Country proudly delves into the country’s history, “history” is absent in My Homeland. Though the locations of the five stories are deliberately selected for the width of rural storytelling, the depth of history is ostensibly missing in the narrative. This absence of the “history” of the countryside is not an oversight, but rather a reflection of the center’s controlled view of the periphery—the countryside needs to be “new”—new environment, new technologies, new business modes, new spirits, etc. The past of the rural is better off going unmentioned, as they are ghostly reminders of rural decay (Yeh et al., 2013). The only time that a rural past appears in the film is in “The Last Class” when the students stage the past for the Teacher Fan in order to retrieve his memory. This scene is allegorical to the whole film and this new mode of portraying countryside—the real past of rural China is unspeakable and irretrievable; it can only be allowed to re-appear as staged theater. In the meantime, as the current village has to be disguised as the old one, its very existence also dissolves in deception. In other words, the real countryside could not be there, and what could (be allowed to) be there cannot be real. What appears to be “real” on stage is nothing more than a carefully orchestrated performance. At the end of this episode, the teacher and the students rejoin in front of a row of colorfully luminous school buildings, a famous rural school known for its unique look and contribution to rural education. While this part is certainly meant to symbolize the colorful dreams that the improved education can offer rural children, the beautifully lit and dazzling campus becomes yet another hallucinating simulacrum where the real rurality is again displaced (Figure 7).

Just as My People, My Country appropriates the representation of countryside in grand historiography, American Dreams in China, the master text of Coffee or Tea? also establishes a nationalistic storytelling frame for the latter. It should be noted that both American Dreams in China and Coffee or Tea? fall into what Yiu-Wai Chu would call “main(land) melody”—main melody films (commissioned to be) made by Hong Kong directors. In Chu’s study of the Hong Kong directors making films reflecting state-endorsed ideologies and values since 2010, Chu argues that their participation contributed to the “commercial Blockbüberisation” of the main melody genre (Chu, 2022, p.12) In American Dreams in China, three Beijing University students in the 1980s found an English test training school called “New Dream” (whose real-life counterpart is New
Figure 7. At the end of “The Last Class,” Teacher Fan and his students rejoin in front of a row of colorfully luminated school buildings. The beautifully lit and dazzling buildings become yet another hallucinating simulacrum where the real rurality is again displaced.

Oriental Education Group, once China’s largest private tutoring firm) that assists tens of thousands of Chinese students in taking the TOEFL and GRE tests. At the end of the film, facing allegations by the U.S.-based Educational Testing Service (ETS) of intellectual theft and racist arrogance, the men deliver an eloquent speech condemning long-held discriminations that the West has committed against China and proudly announce the arrival of the “Chinese Dream.” Strikingly, this simple “East versus West” and “national revival versus imperial oppression” dichotomy continues in Coffee or Tea? As the team’s coffee business takes off, they face a choice whether to sell the business to an international coffee corporation to secure immediate personal gains, or to continue developing the brand for the long-term benefits of the village (and at the expense of risking personal gains). In these two texts, the Western imperial oppression that haunted China since the 20th century is personified as hostile transnational corporations whose sole purpose is to suppress the advancement of Chinese national enterprises. If American Dreams in China reflects the “Chinese Dream” of the urban middle-class, then the fairytale-like success of the rural-based coffee plant in Coffee or Tea? proclaims that the pride and greatness of the “Chinese Dream” can also be realized in the countryside.

Therefore, juxtaposing My Homeland and Coffee or Tea? with their respective prequels makes quite clear that both films demonstrate how the narrative of national pride extends from stories of the center to that of the periphery. While the prequels mourn the nation’s wounded past and celebrate the heretofore developments on a grand, national level, the sequels turn to the depiction of the “small units.” However, it should be noted that even within the “small” stories in the sequels, the power logic of “center (big) over periphery (small)” is omnipresent. In My Homeland, many characters are portrayed to make voluntary self-sacrifices for the “big family” (such as Teacher Fan in his youth and the artist who passes up a personal development opportunity to serve the village). In Coffee or Tea? debates concerning whether to sell the brand are not purely business decisions, but rather a moral one valuing personal (which is often presented to be short-sighted) gain against collective wellbeing. In this sense, the “urban-rural” is not just about geographical demarcation, but more importantly, about power differentials—the center always precedes the periphery, and the national, the individual. Of course, the sacrifice for the big family is always
duly rewarded. Thus, in *Coffee or Tea?* when (but only when) the macro-level crisis concerning national/communal pride is resolved, Li Shaoqun, the “misunderstood” son, and his village chief father are able to finally reconcile their long-strained relationship with the son winning the approval of the powerful “father.”

While *My Homeland* and *Coffee or Tea?* appropriate power through their upward intertextuality with master texts, they each also carefully orchestrate intertextuality with other peer texts and develop an intellectual superiority regarding the narrative. Every episode in *My Homeland*, for instance, hides numerous innuendos that demand a certain (intellectual and/or pop cultural) literacy to understand. For example, in “A Beijing Good Person,” the country bumpkin cousin is played by the non-professional actor who stars as another peasant character in a highly-acclaimed rural crime story *Summer Detective* (*Pingyuan shang de Xia luo ke*, Xu Lei, 2019), and the ending scene of this episode where the three men ride on the motorcycle clearly alludes to a similar scene in *Summer Detective*. The next episode, “A Mystery of UFO” mixes allusions to two recent blockbusters, *Detective Chinatown 2* (*Tangren jie tang an*, Chen Sicheng, 2018) and *Crazy Alien* (*Fengkuang de waixing ren*, Ning Hao, 2019), through references to shared directors, actors or relatable characters. Other examples are too extensive to list here. The use of such references is not merely a simple “egg hunting” game, but rather used to reveal an exertion of cultural capital in producing and, importantly, understanding the texts. The action of embedding these “Easter eggs” suggests that even a qualified appreciation of these two cinematic rural stories requires a certain cultural literacy. As filmmakers and viewers busily engaged in placing and discovering these “eggs,” the sincerity and seriousness of telling rural stories dissolves in the playfulness of a literacy game.

Finally, beyond the intertextuality with other cinematic texts, the center-periphery power play is also demonstrated in the appropriation of the grassroots representation of rural China, especially via the short videos on social media. As scholars have argued, the short videos from the rural vloggers are a most revolutionary Chinese cyber phenomenon in recent years with videos ranging from most unadorned, straightforward recording of rural everyday life to gentrified and aestheticized portrayal of utopian rurality (Han, 2020). Although both are still subject to platform algorithms, the energy, the liveliness and diversity that these videos deliver about rural China are undeniable (especially the former type) and even regarded as “weapons of the underclass” for their function in enhancing rural visibility (Liu & Wang, 2020, p. 52). This smartphone enabled digital-visual economy forms an interactive triangular of technicity, sociality, and aesthetics (Yang, 2021). While making *My Homeland*, the production team launched a campaign of “Great Changes in Every Countryside Household” (*shangxiang jubian, qianjia wanhu*) on Douyin and called for submissions of videos on this topic. In the film, these “common” non-professional short videos are used as transitions between each episode. For example, in the transition between the first and second episode, dozens of cellphone screens jabbing “the memory and taste of my own hometown” fade in and out in one frame. While critics notice that this film uses new media to keep the storytelling going (Li, 2020; Dai, 2020), the effects go beyond pure instrumental usage. While each videographer tells their own stories, they also speak (or rather are allowed to speak) in a collective language, a language with messaging and wording approved by the grand discourse. A meaningful scene at the end of the film where hundreds of small “we media” screens zoom out to fit into a PRC map further symbolizes this subjugation. The fact that a grand narrative like *My Homeland* has to incorporate short videos demonstrates that this new cyber phenomenon has been too prevalent and influential to be ignored. Though the nature of these rural short videos is fragmented and decentralizing, the way they are incorporated in the text essentially retains their
forms but castrates the spirit. The taming of the Bakhtinian heteroglossia in these grassroots videos is an ostensible display of power (Figures 8 and 9).

Conclusion

Rural China undeniably has gained increasing visibility in recent years through various media fronts. As this article demonstrates, My People, My Homeland and Coffee or Tea? exhibited during a National Day window with special social-political connotations, proudly celebrate changes taking place in Chinese rural areas and prescribe a profound ideological formula of the “center/urban-periphery/countryside” relationship with implicit power and superiority.

This renewed paradigm of portraying and imagining the periphery and the asymmetric relationship between the center and periphery remains ubiquitous in the two films, spanning from
content to structure to the social-political signals embedded within the narrative. On the textual level, the portrayal of the countryside both before and after the changes are not only over-simplified and homogenous but also adhere to certain implicit ideologies and values. The countryside is indeed changing, but only with the support transmitted by the center and, in turn, simultaneously serving the center. In Mary Louise Pratt’s (2002) seminal discussion of the center-periphery power relations, she urges us to be critical of “the ways in which the center encodes the periphery in accounts of modernity,” and be cautious with the teleological account that the periphery is simply behind and will catch up in time (p.22). Not surprisingly, this kind of positivist account can clearly be observed in the “center-periphery” relations represented in these two films. Indeed, the rural can “progress,” but mainly with the transfusion (of technologies, ideas and talents) from the center, and in turn, the rural “catches up” with the center and continues to serve the center. When Wen Tiejun, China’s leading agronomist, proposed New Rural Reconstructionism (xin nongcun jianshe) in the mid-2000s, he warned that China’s modernization process should not be a process of capital formation and expansion achieved by way of colonization like the Western countries, and Abramson (2015) argues that Wen critiques “urban consumption-driven economic growth in the 21st century as a kind of national self-colonization” (Wen, 2007, p. 159). Yet, it seems like this “national self-colonization” mode is still presented as an “ought to be” in these two films.

In addition to the direct representation of the rural, the hierarchical relationship also lies in the intrusive action of looking from the center. This “looking” is shown on both the textual and intertextual levels. Clifford’s (1997) analysis of museums of indigenous cultures points out that such museums are embodiments of exchanges between asymmetrical parties of power, where the peripheral work is brought “to an established center, for appreciation and commodification” (202). In these two films, both the rurality and the grassroots representation of the rurality are the “exotic” exhibition pieces brought to the “center” for “proper” appreciation. The “center” here is not merely geographical, but also political and discursive, and the two films embody what Pratt would call “the center’s self-endowed interpretive monopoly” (2002, p.34). On the surface level, both films are “centered” upon the countryside, but the real center of the film remains still the power-saturated “gaze” upon the countryside.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Weiwei Lu  https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4173-2235
Han Li  https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8047-8343

Notes

1. While “rural China,” “Chinese rural areas,” and “Chinese countryside” are used to refer to the “rural areas” under discussion in this article, there is a subtle yet critical change in the Chinese term used for “rural” in the Party language (as elaborated below), especially following the announcement of the 2017 “Rural Revitalization Strategy.” The wording change, namely, from “nongcun” (lit. agriculture village) to “xiangcun”
(rural village), does not have a straightforward corresponding English translation. The significance of this change is discussed in the article’s introduction and “xiangcun” is used in places where such wording is important to our understanding of the construction and interpretation of the rural images in the two films.
2. While the proportion has modestly risen since the historically low point in 2015 (e.g., 4.78% of the total in 2016 and 5.42% in 2017, the overall balance still significantly favors urban-situated titles (Zhang, 2019).
3. My Homeland features Ning Hao as the master director and a constellation of commercially and critically recognized directors in charge of individual chapters. The five chapters are, respectively, directed by Ning Hao, Xu Zheng, Chen Sicheng, Yan Fei & Peng Damo, and Deng Chao & Yu Bai mei.
4. This article is not arguing whether this renewed narrative is inherently good or bad, or how (in)accurate it is in portraying the “real” countryside, which itself is a constructed idea and contested field. Instead, the article’s main aim is to demonstrate the center’s efforts in exploring new storytelling possibilities and how this revised model reflects, and in turn serves, the socio-cultural politics behind it. We want to thank the two anonymous reviewers for helping us to reflect on this.
5. In summer 2019, Ning Hao and Beijing Jingxi Culture & Tourism Company reportedly received a proposal from China Film Administration to make a film reflecting the achievement of “rural poverty alleviation.” Beijing Jingxi Culture & Tourism Company also participated in the distribution of the “main melody” blockbusters including Wolf Warriors 2 (Wu Jing, 2017) and Wondering Earth (Guo Fan, 2019). Also, 10 days after My Homeland’s premier (on October 11th), a workshop co-organized by the China Literature and Art Critics Association (CLACA) and the China Film Association, two state culture organizations, was held in Beijing to discuss “the new looks of the well-off films” (xiaokang dianpan de xin jingguan). Similarly, supported by the China Film Administration’s special funds for “outstanding domestic cinema,” Derek Hui was commissioned to make a film involving the subject of “rural poverty alleviation and youth entrepreneurship.” With shooting starting in July 2020, the entire film production was completed within 3 months in order for it to be released during the National Day week.
6. For example, the village in “The Last Class” (in Zhejiang province) meets the typical “water town” impression that people have for this area. In the same light, the ethnic minority cultures in “A Mystery of UFO” and the impoverished desert in “The Way Back Home” also, respectively, reveal and reinforce the stereotypical imaginaries people have for the under-developed provinces in southwest and northwest China.
7. Another example of disappearing history in “The Last Class” occurs when the villagers busily staging the classroom to what it was like when they were children keep saying, “We cannot go back to what it was like before.” This feigned “complaint” about the difficulty to make the classroom old is meant to offer praise from the great improvements happened in the rural areas, and at the same time a happy announcement that “We do not need to go back in history.”

References

Abramson, D. B. (2015). Periurbanization and the politics of development-as-city-building in China. Cities, 53, 156–162. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2015.11.002

Ban, Z. (2018). Tracing the discourse of migrant labor in China: Mobility, fixity and displacement in the workshop of the world. International Journal of Communication, 12, 3979–3996.

Biao, X. (2007). How far are the left-behind left behind? A preliminary study in rural China. Population, Space and Place, 13(3), 179–191. https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.437

Chen, F. (2016). 农村剧为何越来越萧条? [Why did rural TV series production diminish?] Guangming ribao. http://opinion.people.com.cn/n1/2016/0614/c1003-28442551.html

Chen, J., & Ji, Z. (2020). 乡愁共振与寓居想象: 乡村综艺双重介寓 [The nostalgic resonance and the imagined space: The double destiny of the countryside in rural reality shows]. Xiandai Chuanbo, 12, 98–103.
Chu, S. Y. (2022). Main melody films: Hong Kong directors in mainland China. Edinburgh University Press.
Clifford, J. (1997). Routes: Travel and translation in the late twentieth century. Harvard University Press.
Dai, Q. (2020). 萧电影《我和我的家乡》的多体裁、跨媒介与互文性特色 [On the cross-genre, trans-media and intertextual characteristics of My People, My Homeland]. Zhongguo Wenyi Piping, 11, 27–32.
Fang, K. (2022). What is Zimeiti? The commercial logic of content provision on China’s social media platforms. Chinese Journal of Communication, 15(1), 75–94. https://doi.org/10.1080/17544750.2021.2016877
Gao, Y., & Fennell, S. (2018). China’s rural–urban inequality in the countryside. Springer Nature.
Han, X. (2005). Chinese discourses on the peasant, 1900-1949. State University of New York Press.
Han, L. (2020). From disenchantment to reenchantment: Rural microcelebrities, short video, and the spectacle-ization of the rural lifescape on Chinese social media. International Journal of Communication, 14, 3769–3787.
Hou, J., & Zhang, Y. (2022). Selling poverty” on Kuaishou: How entrepreneurialism disciplines Chinese underclass online participation. Global Media and China, 7(3), 263–282. https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364221095895
Knight, J. (1995). Price scissors and intersectoral resource transfers: Who paid for industrialization in China? Oxford Economic Papers, 47(1), 117–135. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.oeep.a042156
Lin, J., & de Kloet, J. (2019). Platformization of the unlikely creative class: Kuaishou and Chinese digital cultural production. Social Media + Society, 5(4), 1–12. https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119883430
Li, M., Tan, C., & Yang, Y. (2019) Shehui Ren: Cultural production and rural youths’ use of the Kuaishou video-sharing app in Eastern China. Information, Communication & Society, 23, 1–16. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1585469
Liu, T. (2018). 短视频、乡村空间生产与艰难的阶层流动 [Short-video, Production of Rural Space and the Tough Mobility of Social Class]. Journal of Education and Media Studies, 6, 13–16.
Liu, R. (2021). 国庆档电影 (2012-2020) 对中国国家形象的建构 [The construction of China’s national image by National Day movies (2012-2020)]. [Master’s Thesis, Shandong Normal University] https://cdmd.cnki.com.cn/Article/CDMD-10445-1021114858.htm
Liu, Z., Liu, S., Jin, H., & Qi, W. (2017). Rural population change in China: Spatial differences, driving forces and policy implications. Journal of Rural Studies, 51, 189–197. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2017.02.006
Liu, J., & Wang, Y. (2020). 新媒体赋权与城乡分化的重塑 —基于尚村“快手下乡”的个案分析 [New media empowerment and reconfiguration of urban-rural division — a case study of the “Kuaishou in the Villages” program in the Shang Village]. Journalism and Communication Review, 73(5), 46–54.
Li, Z. (2020). 融媒体视域下主旋律影片的叙事变革—以电影《我和我的家乡》为例 [The change of narrative mode of main melody films — case study of My People, My Homeland]. Xinmeiti Yanjiu, 4(1), 121–125.
Meyer-Clement, E. (2020). Rural urbanization under Xi Jinping: From rapid community building to steady urbanization? China Information, 34(2), 187–207. https://doi.org/10.1177/0920203X19875931
Morrow, K. J. (2019). Urban and rural encounters in Chinese postsocialist film and media. [Doctoral dissertation, University of Washington]. ResearchWorks at the University of Washington: http://hdl.handle.net/1773/43985
Park, C. (2014). Nongjiale tourism and contested space in rural China. Modern China, 40(5), 519–548.
Pratt, M. L. (2002). Modernity and periphery: Toward a global and relational analysis. In E. Mudimbe-Boyie (Ed.), Beyond dichotomies: Histories, Identities, cultures, and the Challenge of globalization (pp. 21–47). SUNY Press.
Smith, G. (2018). The campaign rolls on: rural governance in China under Xi Jinping and the war on poverty. China: An International Journal, 16(3), 163–178. https://doi.org/10.1353/chn.2018.0030
Sun, W. (2014). *Subaltern China: Rural migrants, media, and cultural practices*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Tsing, A. (1993). *In the realm of the diamond queen: Marginality in an out-of-the-way place*. Princeton University Press.

Wang, J. (2001). 农村、乡村概念比较的社会学意义 [The usage of nongcun and xiangcun for sociological studies]. *Academic Forum*, 2, 126–129. https://doi.org/10.16524/j.45-1002.2001.02.034

Wangyou qidai, (2019). 网友期待“返乡体”文章多提供建设性意见 [Netizens expect the “Homecoming” essays to offer more constructive opinions]. *GMW*. https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2019-04/02/nw.D110000gmrb_20190402_2-07.htm

Wang, Y., & Su, Y. (2017). 乡村振兴—中国农村发展新战略 [Rural revitalization — China’s new rural developmental strategy]. *Journal of the Central Institute of Sociology*, 6, 49–55.

Wen, T. (2007). Deconstructing modernization. *Chinese Sociology and Anthropology*, 39(4), 10–25. https://doi.org/10.2753/CSA0009-4625390401

Women de xiangcun, (2019). 我们的乡村有“返乡体”中看不到的美好 [Our countryside has the beauty that is not reflected in the “Homecoming” essays]. *GMW*. https://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2019-04/02/nw.D110000gmrb_20190402_1-07.htm

Wen, X. (2019). TV show’s rural charm. *China Daily*. http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201903/20/WS5c918c19a3104842260b17b2_2.html

Xie, X. (2016). 农村题材电影的创作与传播研究 [The production and distribution of contemporary rural films]. Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe.

Xue, J. (2018). 农村题材电影的创作与传播研究 [The production and distribution of contemporary rural films]. Zhongguo Dianying Chubanshe.

Yan, H. (2019). 为何银幕上农民形象越来越少了[Why did the peasant images on the screens become fewer and fewer?] https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/O1F_AdZtDd8ezoUeg4YLQ

Yang, H. (2017). 镜中乡土与乡村—1949年以来的中国乡村电影研究 [The land and peasants in the lens—Chinese rural cinema since 1949]. Wuhan daxue chubanshe.

Yang, Y. (2021). Smartphone photography and its socio-economic life in China: An ethnographic analysis. *Global Media and China*, 6(3), 259–280. https://doi.org/10.1177/20594364211005058

Yeh, E.T., O’Brien, K. J., & Ye, J. (2013). Rural politics in contemporary China. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 40(6), 915–928. https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2013.866097

Zhang, L. (2001). *Strangers in the city: Reconfigurations of space, power, and social networks within China’s floating population*. Stanford University Press.

Zhang, X. (2015). 被遮藏的乡村与被想象的农民—新世纪中国农村题材电视剧创作批评 [The: critique of Chinese rural-subjected TV series in the new millennium]. *Chinese Television*, 5, 57–61.

Zhang, X. (2019). 乡土中国的镜像呈现—改革开放40年来农村题材电视剧创作流变 [The visual representation of rural China: the transformation of rural-subjected TV series in the past four decades]. *Chinese Television*, 1, 16–21.

Zhang, Y. (2020). *Going to the countryside: The rural in the modern Chinese cultural imagination, 1915–1965*. University of Michigan Press.

Zhang, H. (2019). 中国城乡关系演变70年:从分割到融合 [The evolution of China’s urban-rural relations in the past seven decades: from separation to integration]. *Zhongguo Nongcun Jingji*, 3, 2–17.

Zhang, Q., Zhang, H., & Liu, Z. (2018). 乡村振兴：从衰落到复兴的战略选择 [Rural revitalization: the strategic choice from decline to revival]. *Economy and Management*, 32(1), 6–11.

Zhou, Z., Lu, S., & Yu, P. (2021). 银幕里的县城和农村去哪儿了? [Where did the villages and small towns go on the screens?]. *The paper*. https://m.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_11455621

Zweig, D. (1990). Evaluating China’s rural policies: 1949-1989. *The Fletcher Forum of World Affairs*, 14(1), 18–29.
**Author Biographies**

Weiwei Lu is Associate Professor in the School of Foreign Languages at Southeast University (Nanjing, China). Her research interests are folklore literatures in Chinese and Japanese literary traditions. In addition to her original articles, Weiwei Lu is also the translator of Japanese sociologist Chizuko Ueno’s works.

Han Li is Associate Professor of Chinese in the Department of Modern Languages and Literatures at Rhodes College (Memphis, USA). Her research interests include the global transplantation of “Chinese-ness” and contemporary Chinese cinema and media.