

## Food culture and nostalgia in the *Sannong* video

*Xiaolu Xu*

University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield, HD1 3DH

---

### ARTICLE INFO

---

#### *Article history:*

Received 28 July 2021

Received in revised form 01  
March 2022

Accepted 28 March 2022

---

#### *Keywords:*

*Sannong* video

food culture

nostalgia

Chinese urbanisation

migrant workers

---

### ABSTRACT

---

This research reviews the rural nature of Chinese society and analyses the elements that engage viewers in the *Sannong* videos from this perspective. Urban dwellers, rural dwellers and rural migrants have all been greatly affected by rapid urbanisation. The *hukou* system has led to a dichotomy between urban and rural China and a stigmatised image of peasants and the countryside. In this environment, people lost their sense of belonging and became nostalgic. For the first time since the spread of social media to rural dwellers and rural migrants, peasant groups have had the opportunity to reconstruct the image of peasants and the countryside as the protagonists of a narrative. In this study, 10 videos were selected from each of the two distinctive video accounts to compare and analyse their content. The common features of the two accounts can be considered as the reason for the popularity of the *Sannong* videos. In addition to the fact that a large number of viewers like the *Sannong* videos, this phenomenon may reflect the plight of urbanisation in China.

---

### Introduction

The word *Sannong* was first mentioned in 2005 by Premier Wen Jiabao in a speech on the work of the government, and it can also be called Three Rural Issues. It refers to the three aspects of China's rural development: agriculture, rural areas and farmers. The *Sannong* videos can therefore be thought of as videos by rural video creators who focus on farmers and show rural life in a rural context. In recent years, there has been an influx of farmers' videos on social media platforms, and their videos have attracted a large number of followers even if the quality of the videos is uneven. The purpose of this paper is to explore the elements of the *Sannong* videos that attract viewers.

### Literature review

Fei (1992) conducted an in-depth structural analysis of Chinese rural society by carrying out extensive fieldwork in his book *From the Soil*, and he argued that the grassroots of Chinese society was rustic. He argues that the unit of Chinese rural communities is the village, with a small rate of population movement, and that rural society is characterised by stability and little change. This is why the Chinese value the Chinese philosophy that people must return to their hometown after death. At the same time, he also pointed out that rural society was governed by ritual (*li*) as opposed to modern rule by law and that rituals are traditions and rules that have been discovered through fixed circumstances and handed down by generations of people. More importantly, Fei (1992) suggested that the traditional Chinese social structure was a '*chaxugeju*',

which means a self-centred network of social relations and the network of relationships is flexible. Under this influence, rural society was a society of acquaintances, where one could seek help from acquaintances for any hardship in real life, and 'acquaintances' became the signature word of Chinese society. This research argues that Fei's study of Chinese rural society is of great significance. Sixty years have passed since the concept of 'ritual society' was introduced, and although China has, with social changes, taken on many characteristics that are different from the purely ritual society described by Fei, Chinese society is still typical of ritual society. It is from the perspective of a ritual society that we can better understand the factors that attract viewers to the Sannong video.

It has long been difficult for Chinese peasants to speak out for themselves. Since the 1920s, there has been a proliferation of articles on Chinese peasants (Han, 2005). The image of the peasant is presented in literature, film and television dramas, and art, and their image has always been artistically constructed by artists, writers and others. The peasants who appear in mainstream media are usually village leaders, whereas the ordinary peasant public never had the means to showcase themselves until the advent of social media and the spread thereof to rural communities. In its statistical report on China's Internet development in 2021, China Internet Network Information Center (CNNIC) showed that China's Internet popularity rating was 70.4%, the number of rural Internet users was 309 million, and the Internet popularity rating in rural areas was 55.9%. Research on social media use in rural China has focused on the impact of short-form video platforms on rural audiences. Young people in rural China are influenced by micro-celebrities, and in their belief that micro-celebrities are easy to replicate, they choose to focus more on making short videos than on studying hard, thereby becoming 'invisible dropouts' (Li, et al., 2020). Rural Chinese women innovatively use WeChat to learn about modern Chinese female thought, sell products, and express repressed emotions (Wang & Sandner, 2019). Other scholars have used ethnographic cases

to focus on some interesting phenomena in the use of social media by rural Chinese populations, examining the wider impact of social media on Chinese farmers to friendship, family, marriage, education, consumption, politics and economics (McDonald, 2018). But few studies have dealt with how farmers have taken control of the discourse and reconstructed the image of Chinese farmers through social media.

Since the beginning of urbanisation in China, a large number of peasants have entered the cities in what has been described as one of the largest migrations in human history (Chan, 2013), and these urban migrants have been referred to in the media as '*nongmingong*' (migrant workers). The media has always focused on migrant workers to collect debts or to highlight their difficult lives, and most of these reports and documentaries have expressed sympathy for migrant workers (Rofel, 2015). Most studies have focused on the wages of Chinese rural migrants in the urban labour market, income transfers for rural migrants, the mental health status of rural migrants, the living environment of migrant workers, and the living conditions of migrant workers in cities: marginalisation, among other issues (Keung Wong et al., 2006; Knight et al., 1999; Li et al., 2007; Liu & Reilly, 2004). In terms of work, they are mainly engaged in the tertiary sector and construction in the city (Knight et al., 1999), mostly in manual and unskilled work (Yu & Hu, 1998), work that urban dwellers do not want to do (Roberts, 2001). Although rural migrants work hard their wages are low (Tan, 2020). Due to China's hukou system (Chan, 2010), these migrant workers have largely no access to urban social security in the city (Feng et al., 2002), their children find it difficult to access education in the city (Keung Wong et al., 2006; Wang, 2020), they have to deal with poor accommodation since only a minority can afford urban housing (Shen & Huang, 2003), and they are discriminated against in the city because they are considered socially unstable and backward (Kuang & Liu, 2012). Rural migrants experience increased stress in urban life (Schindler & Sira, 1999), which causes them to miss their hometown immensely (Zhang, 2014). Some studies have

investigated high stress levels as a key factor in the high smoking rates of rural migrant groups in China (Cui et al., 2012). Research on improving the living environment of migrant workers has pointed to the Chinese household registration system as a key cause of discrimination against rural peasants and rural migrants (Kuang & Liu, 2012). However, few scholars have studied how rural migrants themselves regulate their psychological state. One study has analysed the main motivation for Chinese rural migrants to return to rural areas for tourism from a Chinese philosophical perspective: nostalgia. The authenticity of rural tourism can effectively help rural migrants relieve stress and find a sense of identity and belonging (Meng et al., 2019). Nostalgia can trigger positive emotions such as happiness, pride, joy and enhanced stress tolerance (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1997; Kaplan, 1987; Lewis & Haviland, 1993), but few scholars have examined the important influence of the Three Farmers video on rural migration.

### Methodology

The content of the video is strongly influenced by Chinese rural customs and culture, and the researcher in this research is from a remote rural area of China and has been a viewer of the Sannong video for four years. The researcher chose interpretivism because it allows her to apply her childhood experience of living in the countryside and viewing experience to analyse more deeply the reasons for the Sannong videos' popularity. This study uses a qualitative approach. Quantitative analysis is suitable for analysing the characteristics of phenomena, internal and external relations and change patterns (Sukamolson, 2007), whereas qualitative analysis usually emphasises in-depth analysis of content rather than quantification when collecting and analysing data (Maher & Dertadian, 2018). This study uses content analysis to analyse, trying to see the essence through the phenomenon, combining the video content, video commentary and the life experiences of the video creators to conduct an exploratory and inductive study of the phenomenon of the popularity of the Sannong videos among viewers.

The data comes from China's short-video platform Watermelon (Xiguashipin) Video which is secondary data. The reason for choosing this video platform rather than Douyin is that it offers numerous courses teaching new creators how to make videos, and it creates a special column called 'farmers' for the creators and audiences which is an important feature that sets Watermelon video apart from other video platforms. As the first short video software to set 'farmers' as a separate channel, it has attracted a large number of Sannong video makers and loyal viewers of Sannong videos. Therefore, the data selected from Watermelon video is more representative. Two featured Sannong video accounts were chosen on the Watermelon video platform: Li Ziqi (55.081 million followers) and Rural Fourth Brother (*nongcunsi*; 5,677,000 followers). The top 10 most-viewed videos were selected for both accounts. The advantage of selecting the data in this way is that the videos are representative, and it is easy to determine which types of videos viewers like the most. The method of video analysis is to encode each video according to the scene, picture content, sound, characters, subtitles and location, and then compare the characteristics of the two video accounts to find the similarities. The date of data collection was 17 March 2021. The use of EXCEL software allows the objectives of this research to be achieved. All the data used in this study were derived from data publicly available on the Watermelon video platform, and there were no ethical issues.

### Findings

Li Ziqi's video titles have commonalities: they are close to the subject, vivid and thought-provoking. Microscopically, its video titles describe what the video is about and there is a good use of adjectives to describe the food produced, leaving viewers hungry for more. For example: 'The sweetness of roasted sweet potatoes and the freshness and spiciness of hot and sour noodles, a nice warm winter taste'. Some titles make you think, for example: 'A thousand years of paper in Chang'an, the original paper was made in this way'. Other titles explicitly relate the food to the season, for

example: 'The hills are red again, so in autumn we must make some hanging persimmon cakes to taste the sweetness of the harvest'. The characteristics of the Rural Fourth Brother's video titles are as follows: 1) Each title has a complete subject, and the predicate object can form a complete sentence, giving the viewer a general idea of the content of the video through a few short words. 2) Each headline presents at least one image of a character and identifies the subject of the shot. 3) Three-paragraph headings: the first for the background of the video, the second for the description of the activity and the third sentence expressing either feelings or questions. For example, 'When a classmate he hadn't seen for more than 10 years came to play, Fourth Brother hurriedly brought half a side of mutton to entertain him, finally being generous for once'. Li Ziqi's clever use of adjectives makes viewers drool when they see the titles of the videos, and the titles of Rural Fourth Brother's videos all tell a story, give an account of daily life and reflect the characteristics of the characters who appear. The titles amuse the viewers and make them feel comforting.

Of the 10 videos collected from Li Ziqi, eight videos are about food and two focus on the demonstration of traditional Chinese techniques. Her videos are generally updated once a month and the videos collected had an average of 8,719,700 views, 93,500 likes and 12,650 comments. Rural Fourth Brother's videos are updated daily, or comprise two videos a day. The videos are short, and the average number of views is 4,349,200, the average number of likes is 20,000 and the average number of comments is 3,350. Of the 10 videos collected, eight videos are about the process of making food, one video is a propaganda film and another captures daily life in the countryside. Li Ziqi's videos mainly consist of three features: one is the 'Lifetime' series, which shows the whole process of different crops from planting to making food. The second is a series of videos about making food according to the seasons, such as making persimmon cakes in autumn, eating cucumbers in summer and baked sweet potatoes in winter. The third is a demonstration of traditional Chinese skills, such as the art of papermaking and

making cotton quilts. The vast majority of Rural Fourth Brother's videos are about making food, but each episode is a different excuse to make food, so each video tells a different family story. For example, 'Fourth Brother's cousin gave us a 3kg grass carp, and Dad cooked it himself, so we're in for a treat', or 'a cousin's husband gave us a wild river fish', or 'Mum and Dad went to a rural banquet', etc. Since Rural Fourth Brother updates every day, he also shares aspects of daily life in the countryside, such as going to the river pond to catch fish. He also keeps up with government policy, and during COVID-19 he filmed a promotional video to discourage people from going out during this time.

The main characters in Li Ziqi's videos are Li Ziqi and Li Ziqi's grandmother. Li Ziqi is young and beautiful, unlike the micro-celebrities who are often seen online with obvious signs of plastic surgery. Li Ziqi's appearance is more in line with the image of beauty in Chinese aesthetics: small, delicate and natural. Her long dark hair looks particularly good in the video, whether braided and up, loose and down or tied up. Through costume, make-up etc., Li Ziqi portrays different characters in each video based on the theme of the video. The clothes worn in the video 'The fragrance of rapeseed is unforgettable, freshly pressed rapeseed oil is delicious and pairs with everything' show the image of a young farm girl after a good harvest. She is dressed as a woodcutter, finding mushrooms on the mountain in the video 'beef sauce seasoned with local chicken oil, spicy with freshness'. Apart from portraying different characters in her videos, Li Ziqi herself has become an image that is deeply rooted in people's hearts, capable of doing anything. Whether it's persimmon cakes, planting or making quilts she does it all. The main characters in the Rural Fourth Brother's videos are Fourth Brother, his wife, his daughter, his parents, and various guest relatives and friends. The main characters who appear in the film have different personalities, with Rural Fourth Brother being a foodie and a lazy worker; his father being handsome and good at cooking with a good temper; his mother being good at cooking and a little cranky at the same time; his daughter's distinctive feature being understanding and cute.

Li Ziqi is filmed mainly in the yard of her home, in the fields and on the mountains. The video shows pristine mountains, vibrant fields and beautiful Chinese courtyards. The setting of her home is exquisite in every detail, with a vegetable garden that has everything, a corner garden, a pavilion with strong Chinese architecture and a cooking table with a careful display of different flowers depending on the season. The cooking utensils, tableware and tea sets used in the video are all Chinese in style, using a sense of the era props where possible, rural stoves, old-fashioned hoes, cotton quilt making tools etc. Rural Fourth Brother is filmed mainly at home and in the fields. The environments shown in his videos are muddy roads, dilapidated kitchens and cluttered rooms, and the video also shows unique farm tools in the rural areas. There is less evidence of elaborate props in the video which makes the videos more authentic.

Li Ziqi has carefully choreographed the composition of the images, the use of scenery, the scheduling of scenes and other aspects, making the most of the narrative function of the camera. A combination of panoramic, medium and close-up shots is used in the process of recording Li Ziqi's labour and cooking, especially the use of close-up shots. Seven of the 10 videos collected begin with a full shot, and viewers are easily impressed by the natural landscape on display, such as snowy mountains, peach blossom gardens and misty forests. The end of the video is basically a scene sharing a meal with Grandma or a delayed shot showing the magic of the starry night sky. The six minutes and 18 seconds of the video 'beef sauce seasoned with local chicken oil, spicy with freshness' consists of 123 shots, including 43 close-up shots. The video's shooting angles are mainly flat angle and high angle, which enriches the visual effect of the video. Li Ziqi is good at using composition techniques, more frame compositions, followed by centred compositions and thirds compositions, which enhance the video's sense of hierarchy. The most fascinating part of the video is the time-lapse photography, which better captures the passage of time, as day turns to night, flowers bloom, seedlings break through the ground, and

other spectacular natural phenomena. These images in the video greatly enhance the sense of fun and have a powerful visual impact, as well as an educational value. There are many scenes of cats and puppies in Li Ziqi's videos. The lazy moments of meows, the mischievous movements of dogs and the interactive images between Li Ziqi and the animals can somewhat make the videos look more realistic, and viewers will feel more relaxed when they see these images. There are no special effects transitions used in Li Ziqi's video, one screen switches directly to the next, but the viewer is presented with a very natural screen transition. Li Ziqi also focuses on the adjustment of the tone of the picture with a large area of blue laying the foundation for the cooler tones of the picture which can make viewers feel tranquil and emotional. The addition of a few warm colours enriches the cooler tones, enhancing the expressiveness, bringing a poetic and picturesque aesthetic to the picture, achieving the aim of highlighting the visual mood. Rural Fourth Brother often uses long shots to record family interactions in terms of content filming. Most of the videos use medium and close-up shots to capture the images. Rural Fourth Brother is constantly learning filming and editing techniques, opening with a long shot, using some special effects transitions etc. However, in general, the level of filming and editing is low. Obvious problems can be seen during the viewing process, such as in 'Fourth Brother's parents go out for a rural banquet, and the father puts on a "fancy" outfit and the moment he goes out, it's hilarious', there are 11 scenes full of noise and 33 screens where the camera was unsteady.

The sounds in Li Ziqi's videos are mainly sporadic 'human voices' in dialects, action sounds and natural sounds from nature. Each video also features light music played on Chinese instruments, such as the Chinese Zither, erhu fiddle, and flute, as background music. Li Ziqi's video is sporadically distributed with subtitles, which serve two purposes: there are no human voices in the whole video except for the communication with her grandmother, and the subtitles explain part of the food-making process. However, there is still the problem that Li Ziqi's

process of making the food video is difficult to replicate. The second function of the subtitles is to describe the dates using the traditional Chinese calendar such as the 'Spring Equinox' and 'Grain Rain'. This artistic treatment dilutes the idea of time and adds more elements of Chinese customs and traditions to the video. The sounds of the Rural Fourth Brother videos consist mainly of widely distributed 'human voices', nature sounds, action sounds, and light music added later as background music. Light music is also generally played on traditional Chinese instruments. For example, in the scene 'Fourth Brother's parents go out for a rural banquet, and the father puts on a "fancy" outfit and the moment he goes out, it's hilarious', the light music used is made of *suona*. As long shots are used to record the dialectal interactions between the families, but the dialogue lacks clear narration, the video is also equipped with Chinese subtitles and narration subtitles.

### Analysis

It is clear to see that food-themed videos account for the majority of the selected data in both accounts. In the short videos in the food category, food is more like a symbol, and the process of food preparation is the process of food symbolisation. In the videos, the food symbolises the plainness and happiness of rural life, and the strong affection gives each dish a unique scene and story. The different culinary cultures across China are one of the reasons why viewers are attracted to the Sannong video.

The land area of China is approximately 9.6 million square kilometres, with a three-step distribution of terrain from high in the west to low in the east and has a rich variety of geographical landscapes and climatic patterns. Different climates, resources and ethnic groups have created a vastly different food culture across China, with various regional dishes forming the eight major cuisines, namely Sichuan Cuisine, Cantonese Cuisine, Shandong Cuisine, Jiangsu Cuisine, Zhejiang Cuisine, Anhui Cuisine, Hunan Cuisine and Fujian Cuisine. In the video of 'On the way back from digging wild vegetables, the little girl led her grandma across the wooden bridge,

watching the warm heart', Rural Fourth Brother's mother went to the mountain to dig *musa basjoo* roots. In the video 'preserved pork', he showed the preserved pork which is the special food of Sichuan. Li Ziqi's video 'When rice in Casserole meets peppered pork belly chicken, you think there's a story again? Still not!' shows how to preserve meat in rural China. In every household, farmers grow their vegetables so life in the countryside gives you access to the freshest vegetables. In the videos of Li Ziqi and Rural Fourth Brother they are both picking vegetables that they grow themselves. In China, where food safety is a constant concern, this is a perfect fit for people's desire for 'healthy food'. Besides, the ingredients used to make the dishes have strong regional characteristics, as Sichuan is a basin terrain resulting in a cloudy and humid climate, so people who live in Sichuan have been eating spicy food since ancient times, which can effectively remove the dampness in the body. To prevent food spoilage, people in Sichuan are good at making pickled vegetables, chillies and ginger. It is observed that three ingredients are essential in the video of Li Ziqi and Rural Fourth Brother, respectively pickled pepper, pickled ginger and spicy soybean paste. Thus the Sannong videos show the distinctive resources of different regions, as well as the distinctive cooking styles.

Chinese food culture reflects traditional Chinese customs. People from different regions and ethnic groups celebrate festivals and life events on specific days with great feasts. In the video 'Rural Fourth Brother's parents went to the rural banquet', his parents went to a grand rural banquet, which is also a special Sichuan banquet called 'Dam Banquet (*babayan*)'. The name comes from the fact that the yard of a villager's house is shaped like a dam in rural areas of Sichuan, and rural banquet sites are located in the yard of the house, hence the name. The specialty is to make nine steamed dishes; nine means longevity and is considered by the Chinese to be an auspicious number. The purpose is to celebrate their relatives building a new house, which the Chinese call 'housewarming (*qiaoqianzhixi*)'. Li Ziqi brings a red quilt to celebrate a neighbour's 'pork feast (*shazhuyan*)' in Li Ziqi's food video about

Chinese sausage. It means that the owner invites his relatives and friends to help him kill the pig and the owner will cook dishes with the freshly slaughtered pork to thank them for their help. Sometimes the pork is also shared with relatives and friends. In the countryside, this is a big event and is usually done before the Chinese New Year. These customs have disappeared in the cities, therefore the Sannong videos inherit and promote Chinese traditional customs.

The Chinese traditional sense of ethics is reflected in all aspects of everyday life, especially at the dinner table. In the feudal society of ancient China, no matter how much work a woman did for her husband, she was still considered her husband's accessory, so she was not qualified to eat at the table. This kind of feudal thinking has been eliminated through the times. As China is currently in a phase of the dichotomy between urban and rural areas, the cultures they represent are also considered civilised and uncivilised correspondingly. Especially at a time when short video platforms such as Douyin are showing great commercial value, many people are using rural areas as a backdrop for vulgar videos to attract viewers' attention and gain revenue leading to the 'stigmatisation' of rural areas. For a long time, Chinese farmers have not been the main body of the 'farmer narrative'. Before the Sannong videos, the image of the Chinese peasant was imagined and written by professional writers and artists. The peasants are all presented as narrative objects. With the emergence of short videos, farmers finally have the opportunity to become the subjects of their own narratives for the first time and build a new model of farmers' narratives. The plots of these shabby customs that often appeared in rural literature were destroyed by the Sannong videos. The creators of the Sannong video speak for the farmers and use the camera to record rural life and tell people that old and backward customs have been abandoned by the countryside and excellent ethical consciousness has been retained. For example, never waste food, which demonstrates the Chinese people's appreciation of the gifts of nature. Nowadays, people's standard of living is getting higher and there is a serious food waste phenomenon. According to statistics, China

wastes about 35 million tons of food every year, accounting for 6% of the country's total food production, and the urban catering industry wastes as much as 17 to 18 million tons at the table alone (Xinhua, 2020). In the videos of Li Ziqi and the Rural Fourth Brother, every food-themed video includes a scene of a family having dinner. Li Ziqi would let her grandmother take the first bite of each dish and would ask the elders if the meat might be too hard to bite. There were still a lot of unfinished dishes on the table after the meal in the video of the episode where Rural Fourth Brother's parents attend a rural banquet, and the hosts give each guest a small box to take home any leftover food from the table. On the one hand, this reduces food waste, and on the other, it helps those guests whose families are in difficulty. The Sannong videos help the peasant community to speak up, reconstruct the image of the peasant community and the countryside and promote a sense of traditional good ethics that has been forgotten in modern society.

Traditional Chinese food culture also reflects the idea of harmony and coexistence between human beings and nature. In an era of low productivity, people are completely in awe of nature. Since the Industrial Revolution, people's ability to transform nature has greatly improved, and people have demanded more from nature. When the lonely George died (Jones, 2012), it marked the extinction of another species. The idea of human beings living in harmony with nature has been neglected in a commodity economy. In the video of Li Ziqi and the Rural Fourth Brother, viewers are reminded to live in harmony with nature. In the video, Li Ziqi goes to the mountains to collect wild mushrooms and she covers the ground with pine needles to protect the mycelium when she finishes collecting. The idea is also reflected in the video of the Rural Fourth Brother catching fish, and even when catching their own bred fish they abide by the code and release the small fish back into the pond. The Sannong video illustrates Chinese philosophical thinking.

Short food videos turn the 'edibility' of food into 'visibility'. Viewers will compare their own culture with that of the videos to a certain extent when

watching Li Ziqi's and Rural Fourth Brother's videos: 1) The viewer's memory will be awakened, if the viewer's food culture has anything in common with that shown in the video. When watching such food videos, viewers who share the same food culture will recall that they have smelled and eaten such food before. Their memories resonate with the video content, and they will automatically know what the food tastes like. This autobiographical memory induced by smell and taste is known as The Proust Effect. Recent experiments have demonstrated that such memories tend to be stronger and more emotional than memory cues from the other senses, and more effective in reminding people of their experiences from earlier in life (Chu & Downes, 2000; Hinton & Henley, 1993; Waxman, 2008). Every person who works away from home tries to find the taste of memory in the busy city. The Sannong video accounts can provide them with the spiritual comfort to find the taste of home in their memory through videos.

King of the Forest 3252: Watching this video, I remembered a scene from the sixth or seventh year when my mother could shred musa basjoo roots and add cornmeal, sweet potatoes to dry them and make them into a delicacy with salt. (Comment from Rural Fourth Brother's video)

Chen Wan San San: I get teary watching your videos ... because I miss my dad who has gone to heaven so much ... he cooks the same food as you do!

(Comment from Li Ziqi's video)

2) Watching such videos satisfies the curiosity of the public when there is a large gap between the viewers' food culture and that displayed in the videos. Especially for viewers who have never lived in the countryside, there is a huge gap between the ingredients used to cook, the tools used to make the food, and the process of making the food and city life. For those rural people from other regions with different food cultures, different cooking styles also attract viewers to the Sannong videos.

I am a Cantonese boy: I've never heard of musa basjoo roots being edible, odd!

Follow my heart, follow my soul 327: It's the first time I've heard of musa basjoo roots being edible and it looks good.

(Comment from Rural Fourth Brother's video)

90 Years After Ima's Notebook: It's the first time I've seen salted egg yolk in pork liver, what's the purpose?

(Comment from Li Ziqi's video)

According to a Chinese proverb: 'Three generations ago, everyone was a peasant'. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the first census was conducted in 1953 and the total population of China was 601.9 million, with a mainland population of 582.6 million, of which 77.25 million lived in urban areas and 505.34 million in rural areas. The latest figures show that China has an urbanisation rate of over 60% (2020), which means that many city dwellers were of peasant origin, or are descendants of peasants. China is now in a period of urban-rural dichotomy. Urbanisation means demolition and reconstruction, with modern cities becoming increasingly prosperous while the countryside is slowly disappearing. According to the *New York Times* (Johnson, 2014), Chinese villages are disappearing at a rate of 300 a day. The Chinese culture has always been based on rural society (Fei, 1992), so the disappearance of the urban and rural areas is not only a dismantling of physical space but also of lifestyles and spirituality, and this rapid development has brought about spiritual anxiety and a loss of identity for the Chinese people. While urban dwellers enjoy the prosperity brought by the city, they also suffer from environmental pollution, food safety problems, indifferent interpersonal relationships and other problems. Western research on rural gentrification may provide a research perspective for this study despite the differences between Western and Chinese contexts. Rural gentrification was first proposed by Western scholars to describe the changes caused by the influx of wealthy urban dwellers into the British countryside (Phillips, 1993). Research suggests that it is essentially an experience economy, with



affluent city dwellers coming with a longing for the pastoral life (Hines, 2012). These urban dwellers hate the standardisation of city life and are attracted to country life (Clope et al., 1998). This phenomenon occurred because of the highly read industrialisation in the West. This phenomenon in China reflects the current dilemma faced by urbanisation in China. Rural migrants also endure discrimination (Kuang & Liu, 2012). According to Healy's hierarchy of needs (2016), they need to find something more deeply spiritual that can give them a sense of belonging and dignity. As the countryside is the foundation of traditional Chinese culture these Sannong videos can meet these needs.

The term nostalgia has long been considered a neurological disorder or psychological disorder (McCann, 1941; Rosen, 1975), or has been equated with homesickness. Emotion theorists consider nostalgia to be an emotion, a feeling of sadness and longing for the past (Frijda, 1986; Johnson-Laird & Oatley, 1989;). Nostalgia is typically characterised by the self-centredness of the nostalgic subject, and family members, friends, family (Holak & Havlena, 1992) or hometowns etc. all are possible triggers for nostalgia (Wildschut et al., 2006). In addition to satisfying the nostalgia of those who experienced living in the countryside as a child, the Sannong video also satisfies the nostalgia for traditional Chinese culture. Although China has a long history and culture, compared to countries such as Japan and Korea, there is a gap in the transmission of traditional culture and skills in modern society. In the collected data, Li Ziqi shows the traditional skills of making cotton quilt. The makers of the Sannong video are well aware of the needs of their audience and give them enough visual material to satisfy their nostalgic needs.

Brooke's boy: Li Ziqi deserves to be promoted, such a craft is almost lost, it's so awesome, I haven't even seen it before.

(Comment from Li Ziqi's video)

The creators of the Sannong video production have carefully designed the video content in terms of setting, props, and character design in the hope of

taking viewers on a nostalgic journey. Research has shown that the authenticity of the scenes is an important factor in eliciting nostalgia from viewers (Meng et al., 2019). In his view, when a person is on stage he will perform according to the expectations of the audience, and people systematically control and create their own performance by the stage situation, social rules and their own role expectations. First, both Li Ziqi's and Rural Fourth Brother's videos portray characters who are in line with rural life through their 'front stage' behaviour. Viewers prefer a positive image to a negative one and a character with both beauty and a positive personality will be more appealing to viewers. Both Li Ziqi and Rural Fourth Brother have succeeded in creating characters that are popular with audiences. The design of these images is closely linked to the Chinese rural culture, as the Chinese saying goes: 'the poor children early masters (*nongcundehaizizaodangjia*)'. This means that rural children learn survival skills and work from a very young age. Therefore the videos show Rural Fourth Brother's daughter as more understanding and obedient than city children. For example, she took the initiative to share her food and helped her grandmother to cross the one-way bridge. Li Ziqi said in an interview that 'what people see as life skills are just my survival instincts. Before it was for survival, now it's life'. Combined with Li Ziqi's real-life personal experience her on-screen persona is even more realistic. Compared to the flawless characterisation, some flaws in the characters' personalities seem more realistic. Rural Fourth Brother, for example, is portrayed as lazy when working and most active when eating. This makes his personality more realistic, more likely to impress the viewer and also makes the video content more enjoyable.

153937994 Sister you can't mess with: Mum is good at cooking, you are so lucky.

Serenity to Far 2423490: Your daughter is exceptionally understanding, she walks carefully by herself and turns around to hold her grandmother.

Riding an ant in Tibet: Rural Fourth Brother is a foodie!

1688 Candy: Your Dad is so handsome, how did your Mom find such a handsome partner?

(Comments from Rural Fourth Brother's videos)

Xiao Rui 177492025: This woman is not only beautiful, she is a combination of the best of traditional Chinese women, hardworking. Kindness. Wisdom. There is almost nothing she can't do, whoever is lucky enough to marry her is really blessed in their last life!

(Comments from Li Ziqi's videos)

Performance is essentially a form of impression management, where the image portrayed on screen is maintained by a series of details and stories from life. Performance can present an idealised landscape. When the individual presents himself to others, his performance always tends to appeal to and embody those values that are formally recognised in society, whereas in reality his behaviour does not have such values (Goffman, 1969). In the selected video data, Rural Fourth Brother filmed a promotional video in response to a national policy to encourage viewers to quarantine at home during COVID-19, and donations were given to the Wuhan area. In response to President Xi's advocacy of traditional Chinese cultural ethics, Li Ziqi filmed a video on the art of papermaking. These performances received a high number of views and many complimentary comments.

Bellel: Li Ziqi even knows how to do one of the four Chinese inventions, it's so awesome, we must praise you!

(Comment from Li Ziqi's videos)

Lin Yi Food Kitchen: All for the greater good, don't go out without anything particularly important! Rural Fourth Brother is doing the right thing!

(Comments from Rural Fourth Brother's videos)

The relationship between people in Chinese cities is poor. A Chinese proverb says better good

neighbours near than relations far away, yet most people in cities have no communication with their neighbours. Many good traditional ethical concepts are forgotten by some people. Immoral incidents, such as not supporting parents or even leaving them homeless, are all over the social news. There is an old Chinese saying: 'The son wants to fulfil his duty but there are no elders around (*Ziyuyangerqinbudai*)' which means that sometimes parents pass away before their children have had a chance to repay their hard work in bringing them up. Many people choose to work instead of spending time with their parents, and only experience regret when they lose their parents. Nostalgia implies a desire for happy past lives and experiences, and it can help people evoke positive, idealised memories (Wildschut et al., 2006). Caton and Santos (2007) also found that one of the reasons that inspire people to pursue nostalgia is their dissatisfaction with the status quo. The ideal family relationships and interpersonal relationships are created in the Sannong videos. Surviving parents and elders, friendly neighbours, younger generations who respect their elders, elders who love the younger generation and enviable love. The video of Rural Fourth Brother always shows an extended family eating together, and he will call his relatives to come and eat with him when there is something good to eat. Li Ziqi gave up her high-paying job in the city to return to the countryside to take better care of her grandmother. In the video Li Ziqi's filial piety can be seen, always bringing gifts for her grandmother when she goes out, making handmade cotton quilts for her etc. These sincere feelings are touching, regardless of the viewer's nationality and beliefs.

Lin143842143: A hardworking and happy family, I'm so jealous.

Small fish 127272456: Watching the video of the Rural Fourth brother is very comfortable. I can see the family love each other, treat each other with respect, help and love each other with friends and relatives. I feel very warm and can feel a taste of home. Other micro-celebrity's videos are so commercial and full with ads.

(Comments from Rural Fourth Brother's videos)

Hua HQ Qiang: In 2015, her grandmother's illness was a sudden blow to her, she decided to go home to take care of her grandmother, and shooting videos became her financial source, but also her spiritual support. She takes care of her grandmother with all her heart. ... Whether she has a team or not, her videos are pleasing to our eyes, and her strength, kindness, filial piety and talent are beyond what we can often achieve.

(Comment from Li Ziqi's videos)

The Sannong videos create a special 'stage'. The stage for the Sannong videos is naturally the countryside, but the two accounts chosen present a somewhat different 'stage'. Li Ziqi has created an ideal paradise. Her home is located in the mountains of Sichuan, with a large river running through the mountains and spectacular natural scenery that changes with the seasons. Li Ziqi's home has a huge and productive courtyard, where one can pick vegetables and fruits daily in different seasons; an exquisite pavilion in the courtyard, which is covered with flowers in summer. The stage that Li Ziqi built is idealised and artistic so people who have actually lived in the countryside will question the authenticity of Li Ziqi's videos.

Bummer: How did she pick the cherries, mulberries, loquats and strawberries in natural conditions when they're not even in season?!

(Comment from Li Ziqi's videos)

But the greater value of the stage that Li Ziqi has built is to visualise the idyllic life of the Chinese heart and fulfil the audience's expectations of an ideal country life. The stage created in Rural Fourth Brother's video is a bamboo forest rich in produce, muddy roads, a kitchen made of mud bricks, a kitchen with a rural wood-burning stove, and tattered tableware. The shabby and dirty conditions of the house with the exposed electrical wires and the unpainted walls inside. Obviously, it is not aesthetically pleasing, but it is the closest thing to a real rural living environment.

In order to control the elements that appear in the picture, Li Ziqi's videos never show large-scale parties. On the contrary, the most representative video of Rural Fourth Brother is a video of him taking his parents to a rural banquet, in which many technical problems arise. But it is precisely these issues that make Rural Fourth Brother's videos more real and relatable to those viewers who have had similar experiences. Because that's how feasts work in the countryside: rural people hire a team of people who specialise in cooking in the countryside and eat in an open area of the home with borrowed tables and chairs and disposable cutlery and cloths. Rural people would bring almost all members of their family to the banquet so there would be guests of all ages, who in turn would automatically group together to chat in various places, while the children would play around the house. The noise in the video, the clutter all enhances the authenticity of the video and acts as a trigger to evoke nostalgia in the viewer. The video of Rural Fourth Brother shows the rural feast at its most charming.

Muktusha DU: a traditional rural banquet!

(Comment from Rural Fourth Brother's videos)

The images of simple and kind people in rural areas, the harmony of human relationships, the slow pace of rural life, the beautiful natural environment and healthy food shown in the Sannong videos meet the expectations of viewers, in contrast to the chaos of the city. However, the authenticity of the content of the video is open to question due to the subjective awareness of the video maker. Raymond Williams (1975) reviewed many English rural nostalgic literary works in the 16th to 20th centuries in *The Country and the City* and pointed out that the development process of rural literary works itself was a process of selective beautification of the feudal order. As a vehicle for nostalgia, the makers of the Sannong videos also carefully design the characters, the plot, the content of the videos, while deliberately obscuring the negative elements of vernacular and traditional culture. This imagery and glorification are what Featherstone (1995) calls 'wilful nostalgia', which obscures the hardships of the past. Even if Li Ziqi and Rural Fourth Brother had filmed farming

in their videos, since they were earning their income by making short videos rather than by farming like real farmers, viewers would have wondered whether the labour in the videos was staged. Even though the authenticity of the video is questioned, most viewers are still quite willing to accept it. This phenomenon has parallels with Goffman's (1969) explanation of the dramaturgy theory: In fact, audiences are aware of the performer's front stage and backstage behaviour, but they rarely question the credibility of the performer's behaviour. Sometimes people also 'turn a blind eye' to the performer's unintentional and inappropriate behaviour. The authenticity of the video content is not the focus of this research. The value of the Sannong videos lies in the fact that different people can interpret them in relation to their own experiences and imagination, and gain a personal emotional experience of their own.

TTTTLLT: Whatever is true or fake,  
just watch the video.

(Comment from Li Ziqi's videos)

## Conclusion

China is essentially a rural and agrarian country whose culture is rooted in the countryside, and the countryside is an important vehicle for rural culture. After 40 years of reform and opening up, China is in the midst of a great contradiction between tradition and modernity. Rapid urbanisation has led to enormous pressure on urban residents, and rural migrants are treated more unfairly in the cities due to the hukou system which leads to stress and even mental illness. The countryside and its inhabitants are stigmatised by the urban-rural dichotomy brought about by urbanisation. By analysing the content of a total of 20 videos from two selected Sannong video accounts, this study can conclude that the commonalities presented in their videos can be considered as the reason for the popularity of Sannong videos among viewers: 1) The video evokes or satisfies the viewers' nostalgic feelings. 2) The video satisfies the viewers' expectations of the ideal idyllic life through stage performances. 3) The video shows the image of new farmers and spreads

the excellent Chinese traditional culture. 4) The video satisfies the viewers' curiosity about different food cultures. This phenomenon reflects the difficulties faced by China's urbanisation, and although the Sannong video relieves the pressure on people it fails to address the root of the problem.

## References

- Aspinwall, L. G., & Taylor, S. E. (1997). A stitch in time: Self-regulation and proactive coping. *Psychological Bulletin*, *121*(3), 417.
- Caton, K., & Santos, C. A. (2007). Heritage tourism on ROUTE 66: Deconstructing nostalgia. *Journal of Travel Research*, *45*(4), 371–86. doi:10.1177/0047287507299572
- Chan, K. (2013). China, internal migration. In I. Ness & P. Bellwood (Eds.). *Encyclopedia of human global migration*. Blackwell Publishing
- Chan, K. W. (2010). The household registration system and migrant labor in China: Notes on a debate. *Population and Development Review*, *36*(2), 357–64.
- Chu, S., & Downes, J. J. (2000). Odour-evoked autobiographical memories: Psychological investigations of Proustian phenomena. *Chemical Senses*, *25*(1), 111–16. <https://doi.org/10.1093/chemse/25.1.111>
- Cloke, P. L., Phillips, M., & Thrift, N. J. (1998). Class, colonisation and lifestyle strategies in Gower.

- Cui, X., Rockett, I., Yang, T., & Cao, R. (2012). Work stress, life stress, and smoking among rural–urban migrant workers in China. *BMC Public Health*, *12*(1). doi: 10.1186/1471-2458-12-979
- Featherstone, M. (1995). *Undoing culture: Globalization, postmodernism and identity*. Sage.
- Fei, X. (1992). *From the soil*. University of California Press.
- Feng, W., Zuo, X., & Ruan, D. (2002). Rural migrants in shanghai: Living under the shadow of socialism 1. *International Migration Review*, *36*(2), 520–45.
- Frijda, N. H. (1986). *The emotions*. Cambridge University Press
- Goffman, E. (1969). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. Allen Lane.
- Han, X. (2005). *Chinese discourses on the peasant, 1900–1949*. State University of New York Press.
- Healy, K. (2016). A theory of human motivation by Abraham H. Maslow (1942). *British Journal of Psychiatry*, *208*(4), 313–313. <https://doi.org/10.1192/bjp.bp.115.179622>
- Hinton, P. B., & Henley, T. B. (1993). Cognitive and affective components of stimuli presented in three modes. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society*, *31*(6), 595–8.
- Hines, J. D. (2012). The post-industrial regime of production/consumption and the rural gentrification of the New West Archipelago. *Antipode*, *44*(1), 74–97. doi:10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00843.x
- Holak, S. L., & Havlena, W. J. (1992). Nostalgia: An exploratory study of themes and emotions in the nostalgic experience. *Advances in Consumer Research*, *19*, 380.
- Johnson, I. (2014, 2 February). In China, ‘Once the villages are gone, the culture is gone’’. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/02/02/world/asia/once-the-villages-are-gone-the-culture-is-gone.html>
- Johnson-Laird, P. N., & Oatley, K. (1989). The language of emotions: An analysis of a semantic field. *Cognition and Emotion*, *3*(2), 81–123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699938908408075>
- Jones, B. (2012, June 25). Lonesome George, last of the Pinta Island tortoises, dies. *CNN*. <https://edition.cnn.com/2012/06/25/world/americas/lonesome-george-giant-tortoise-dies/index.html>
- Kaplan, H. A. (1987). The psychopathology of nostalgia. *Psychoanalytic Review*, *74*(4), 465–86.

- Keung Wong, D., Li, C., & Song, H. (2006). Rural migrant workers in urban China: Living a marginalised life. *International Journal Of Social Welfare*, 16(1), 32–40. doi: 10.1111/j.1468-2397.2007.00475.x
- Knight, J., Song, L., & Huaibin, J. (1999). Chinese rural migrants in urban enterprises: Three perspectives. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 35(3), 73–104.
- Kuang, L., & Liu, L. (2012). Discrimination against rural-to-urban migrants: The role of the hukou system in China. *Plos ONE*, 7(11), e46932. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0046932
- Lewis, M., & Haviland, J. M. (Eds.). (1993). *Handbook of emotions*. The Guilford Press.
- Li, L., Wang, H. M., Ye, X. J., Jiang, M. M., Lou, Q. Y., & Hesketh, T. (2007). The mental health status of Chinese rural–urban migrant workers. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 42(9), 716–22.
- Li, M., Tan, C. K., & Yang, Y. (2020). Shehui Ren: Cultural production and rural youths' use of the Kuaishou video-sharing app in Eastern China. *Information, Communication & Society*, 23(10), 1499–514.
- Liu, Q., & Reilly\*, B. (2004). Income transfers of Chinese rural migrants: Some empirical evidence from Jinan. *Applied Economics*, 36(12), 1295–313.
- Maher, L., & Dertadian, G. (2018). Qualitative research. *Addiction*, 113(1), 167–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/add.13931>
- McCann, W. H. (1941). Nostalgia: A review of the literature. *Psychological Bulletin*, 38(3), 165.
- McDonald, T. (2018). Strangership and social media: Moral imaginaries of gendered strangers in rural China. *American Anthropologist*, 121(1), 76–88. doi: 10.1111/aman.13152
- Meng, Z., Cai, L., Day, J., Tang, C., Lu, Y., & Zhang, H. (2019). Authenticity and nostalgia – subjective well-being of Chinese rural-urban migrants. *Journal Of Heritage Tourism*, 14(5-6), 506–24. doi: 10.1080/1743873x.2019.1567739
- Phillips, M. (1993). Rural gentrification and the processes of class colonisation. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 9(2), 123–40. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167\(93\)90026-g](https://doi.org/10.1016/0743-0167(93)90026-g)
- Roberts, K. (2001) The determinants of job choice by rural labour migrants in Shanghai. *China Economic Review*, 12: 15–39.
- Rofel, L. (2015). Subaltern China: Rural migrants, media, and cultural practices. *The China*

- Quarterly*, 223, 832–33.  
doi:10.1017/S0305741015000995
- Rosen, G. (1975). Nostalgia: A ‘forgotten’ psychological disorder. *Psychological Medicine*, 5(4), 340–54. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003329170005697X>
- Schindler, R., & Sira, Z. (1999). Immigration, stress, and readjustment. *International Migration Review*, 33(2), 505. doi: 10.2307/2547719
- Shen, J., & Huang, Y. (2003). The working and living space of the ‘floating population’ in China. *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 44(1), 51–62.
- Sukamolson, S. (2007). Fundamentals of quantitative research. Language Institute Chulalongkorn University, 1–20.
- Tan, Y. (2020). Temporary migrants and public space: A case study of Dongguan, China. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1–17.
- Wang, T. (2020). Rural migrants in China: Barriers to education and citizenship. *Intercultural Education*, 31(5), 578–91.
- Wang, Y., & Sandner, J. (2019). Like a ‘Frog in a well’? An ethnographic study of Chinese rural women’s social media practices through the WeChat platform. *Chinese Journal Of Communication*, 12(3), 324–39. doi: 10.1080/17544750.2019.1583677
- Waxman, B. F. (2008). Food memoirs: What they are, why they are popular, and why they belong in the literature classroom. *College English*, 70(4), 363–83.
- Wildschut, T., Sedikides, C., Arndt, J., & Routledge, C. (2006). Nostalgia: Content, triggers, functions. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 91(5), 975–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.5.975>
- Williams, R. (1975). *The country and the city* (Vol. 423). Oxford University Press.
- Yu, D. & Hu, Z. (1998). The road ahead: Analysis of the phenomena of Chinese migrant workers. Beijing: Economic Science Press [In Chinese].
- Zhang, Q. (2014). Homesickness in Chinese migrant workers: Investigating the mediation effects of work adjustment between homesickness and job satisfaction and turnover intentions. Oregon State University.
- China’s urbanization rate hits 60.6 pct. Xinhua. (2020, January 19). [http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/19/c\\_138718450.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-01/19/c_138718450.htm)
- The 47th statistical report on the development of the Internet in China From CNNIC

- Fresh Research reports and Daily Fintech briefings. (2021).

<https://recordtrend.com/research-report/the-47th-statistical-report-on-the-development-of-internet-in-china-from-cnnic/>

[http://www.sainonline.org/pages/zhishiku/%E4%BF%A1%E6%81%AF%E9%80%9A%E6%8A%A5/SAIN\\_Inforsheet%20No%2031.pdf](http://www.sainonline.org/pages/zhishiku/%E4%BF%A1%E6%81%AF%E9%80%9A%E6%8A%A5/SAIN_Inforsheet%20No%2031.pdf)

从节约每一粒粮食做起-新华网Start by saving every grain - Xinhua. (n.d).

[http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-09/18/c\\_1126509070.htm](http://www.xinhuanet.com/politics/2020-09/18/c_1126509070.htm)

第一次全国人口普查公报First National Population Census Bulletin. 首页 . (n.d).

[http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/200204/t20020404\\_30316.htm](http://www.stats.gov.cn/tjsj/tjgb/rkpcgb/qgrkpcgb/200204/t20020404_30316.htm)