

Village Image Chronicles: From Specimens of Nostalgia to Research Supporting Rural Development

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Abstract: *The rapid advancement of urbanization in China has led to the rapid hollowing out and decline of traditional villages, resulting in the continuous loss of cultural heritage and ancient buildings. By intervening in the entire process of village transformation through Image Chronicles, the cultural essence left by humanity over millennia is documented. This paper proposes three perspectives of Image Chronicles documentation to support rural revitalization in the context of villages facing three different outcomes: disappearance, restoration to original condition, and complete renewal. These perspectives are "participant observation," "emic recording," and "new media dissemination." Utilizing the power of imagery, this approach aims to preserve human cultural heritage.*

Keywords: *Image Chronicles, rural revitalization, integration of culture and tourism*

1. Introduction

Over nearly half a century of social change, Chinese villages have exhibited a diverse range of characteristics. Influenced by factors such as the natural environment, ethnic customs, economic development levels, cultural and ecological environments, the living conditions of villages across various regions differ significantly. Under the dominant trend of urbanization, most areas have experienced a situation where young people leave to work in cities, leaving behind the elderly, women, and children. This has undoubtedly exacerbated population loss in villages and triggered a series of village decline phenomena.

With the development of information technology and the widespread adoption of the Internet, human society has fully entered the digital age. To address the widespread phenomenon of village decline, digital image creators have embarked on their unique endeavor of creating village Image Chronicles, contributing to the preservation of human cultural heritage and the revitalization of rural areas. They primarily use photography as their recording method and frequently participate in rural revitalization and intangible cultural heritage protection efforts, thereby contributing to cultural continuity and rural revitalization. The creative approach of these image creators involves using photography to produce images. However, their work not only showcases the intrinsic value of images but also addresses a range of issues related to local culture and community relationships. For instance, they use images as tools to illustrate how culture influences and shapes social experiences. Through the documentation of images, they facilitate cross-cultural communication and exchange, recording the cultural expressions and presentations of different ethnic groups in various ways. This enables those outside the villages to understand the dynamic evolution of ethnic festivals, the details of social organizational activities, and the status of individuals within these communities.[5]

2. Study on the Connotation of Image Chronicles

As photographic artists, their original work was purely an expression and display of art. However, with the popularization of imaging equipment, changes in social perceptions, and the emergence of professional photographers, these image creators have increasingly engaged in the transformation processes of urban and rural communities. By employing anthropological models and ethnographic methods, they create village Image Chronicles, making significant contributions to the visualization, continuity, and development of Chinese rural society and agricultural civilization.

In 1997, Li Tiejing, the head of the China Local Chronicles Guidance Group, emphasized the need to "improve the quality and emphasize the use of chronicles." He urged the use of modern technological achievements and means such as CDs, audiovisual media, and the Internet to explore new fields for

chronicles, enhancing their influence and utilization. In 2007, the Ministry of Culture led the production of the "Chinese Festivals Image Chronicles," which for the first time comprehensively showcased the research, recording, and presentation of representative festivals from various regions and ethnic groups across the country, including temple fairs, song festivals, and major sacrificial ceremonies. Through the use of imaging methods to study, record, and present Chinese festival Image Chronicles, a bright future for China's Image Chronicles was inaugurated.[5]

2.1. What is Image Chronicles?

As the name suggests, Image Chronicles are chronicles recorded through imagery. As a memory-bearing form rooted in images, Image Chronicles typically require the photographer to observe and document the subject over a long period, in a comprehensive and immersive manner, while adhering to the principle of cultural authenticity. Many Image Chronicles works not only follow the principle of authenticity but also broadly reflect the richness and diversity of culture. The value of Image Chronicles lies not only in their aesthetic appeal but more significantly in their role in recording, researching, sharing, and understanding the order of culture.

Imagery serves as a means of documentation and dissemination, and Image Chronicles represent an innovative upgrade and utilization of local chronicles. As a result of economic and social progress, image chronicles have a higher level of public acceptance and comprehension compared to traditional regional chronicles. Their ability to aggregate information and transmit it quickly, along with diverse dissemination channels, provides significant advantages. Researchers discussing Image Chronicles have stated, "Whether it is the natural environment or human civilization, once interpreted by the media, it becomes a compass for understanding the world." This method of using the local to drive the general helps promote regional chronicles culture, enhance influence, and increase public understanding of regional chronicles. In summary, Image Chronicles, while adhering to the relevant regulations of regional chronicles, fully utilize imaging technology to tell stories, finding the optimal combination of local chronicles culture and cultural dissemination innovation.

(1) Consistency between image materials and described content: For historical events, regional changes, or specific groups that need to be recorded, we must strictly adhere to the standards of chronicle documentation. Information such as local customs or myths, which cannot be substantiated by chronicles, should not be used. For example, in creating "Chinese Image Chronicles·Famous Towns and Villages of Fujian," all image selections were based on the principle of "verifiable evidence," and every program script had to be meticulously reviewed and approved by historians and scholars before use.

(2) Adherence to basic principles of image dissemination in the photography production process: The basic principle of image production is to avoid "mechanical reproduction or direct pasting of raw information." It is necessary to use narrators' voices, synchronized recording equipment, background sound effects, drone perspectives, and special lens transitions to deeply analyze and intricately depict the main storyline, creating engaging high-quality works that guide people to gain a deeper understanding of the documented villages. For instance, the image work "Image History of China - Historical Records of Famous Towns and Villages in Fujian Province" employed the method of chronicles to descriptively analyze the national cultural and heritage protection areas of Fuzhou, showcasing its uniqueness and prominent features. It also highlighted the influence of significant figures, praised their contributions, and explored the lifestyles and social development of local residents, revealing the stories of times recorded in various regions and constructing a rich and multi-layered picture of humanistic landscapes.[3]

(3) Creating Image Chronicles based on the "Internet+" approach: Besides the faithful reproduction and display of history during the creation process, we also need to incorporate public participation activities into the imagery. Currently, we are in an era of rapid advancements in internet technology, with various cultural transmission methods emerging continually. Therefore, the creation of Image Chronicles should start from television screens, find appropriate positioning, and actively expand into other channels such as online audio/video media, microfilms, WeChat, short videos, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu to achieve broad media dissemination objectives.

2.2. Type of Image Chronicles

Image Chronicles authentically record events through a combination of text, images, sound, and video. Common types of imagery include chronicles that document ethnic characteristics, known as Ethnic Image Chronicles; chronicles that capture dance, called Dance Image Chronicles; chronicles of sports activities, known as Sports Image Chronicles; chronicles that document Chinese festivals, called Festival

Image Chronicles; chronicles that capture urban transformations, known as Urban Image Chronicles; chronicles that record village changes, known as Village Image Chronicles; and even chronicles that document an individual's life, known as Personal Image Chronicles.

2.3. The Creative methods of Image Chronicles

Different types of Image Chronicles often involve different creative and presentation methods. Depending on the perspective taken, the forms of creation vary. For instance, in creating Image Chronicles for a village, one can adopt the perspective of a tourist, known as Tourist Perspective Image Chronicles, commonly seen in image materials promoted by travel bloggers. Alternatively, it can be a proactive form of Image Chronicles where the village itself initiates the creation of image materials and actively promotes them to the outside world, aiming to promote itself and showcase its revitalization efforts.[1]

The creation process of Image Chronicles (using Village Image Chronicles as an example) typically involves the following steps:

①Topic Selection: Choose valuable subjects for Image Chronicles creation, such as villages facing demolition and disappearance, villages under development for tourism, or exemplary beautiful rural demonstration sites.

②Research: Unlike traditional imagery or film works, Image Chronicles require a true and objective reflection of reality. Deep research is necessary to understand the village's history, characteristics, existing resources, cultural heritage, handicrafts, and other distinctive scenes. This involves drafting a proposal.

③Creation: Gather photographers to stay and create images, including photos, videos, sound recordings, etc. Sometimes, long-term observation and recording over several years may be required to capture details accurately.

④Editing: Compile collected image materials into publications, which could be books, CDs, specialized online spaces, or even photographic exhibitions.

⑤Dissemination: The dissemination of Image Chronicles aims to submit them to relevant institutions, archives, museums, and libraries for collection and public display. Simultaneously, utilizing various online platforms such as audio-video networks, microfilms, short videos, Weibo, and WeChat is essential to reach a wide audience.

⑥Benefits: The primary benefit of Image Chronicles is often for public welfare. For Village Image Chronicles, the crucial function is to remember history and current conditions, serving as a basis for government decision-making and primarily contributing to societal benefits.

3. Image Chronicles Intervention in Village Transformation and Protection

"Hollowing out" is at the core of the issues facing rural China. This primarily stems from rural villages relying heavily on agriculture, while industrial and digital economies dominate due to China's urbanization drive. A significant number of villagers leaving for urban employment has led to sparse populations in villages, accelerating their decline. Undoubtedly, under this backdrop, rural villages in China are gradually disappearing and transforming into new forms, becoming a widespread social trend. However, how can their historical heritage be effectively preserved and the goal of revitalizing rural areas be achieved in the current environment?

Image researchers are employing three distinct approaches: "salvage-style village documentation," "dynamic village documentation," and "new media village documentation." They are dedicated to finding a path that not only protects culture and promotes economic development but also enhances the effectiveness of image production and sharing. Although this solution is just one approach among many, in today's information-driven society, people increasingly rely on imagery to convey information, establish connections, and create value. Therefore, leveraging the power of images to revitalize rural culture and tap into economic potential, thereby contributing to the cultural heritage and historical continuity of villages over centuries, represents an effective choice for rural revitalization.

3.1. "Rescue style" Village Image Chronicles and Ancient Village Information Preservation

Since the reform and opening up, China's rural villages have gradually lost their ability to contribute to material life and culture due to societal transformation and economic development. Concurrently, centuries-old roots embedded in agricultural society have diminished. Many villages have suffered destruction due to urbanization, environmental protection measures, poverty alleviation efforts, or infrastructure development, leading to abandonment. The outflow of young and able-bodied population has further weakened rural areas, rendering them increasingly desolate and dilapidated. To preserve the unique cultural attributes of rural areas, especially symbolic elements such as buildings, historical relics, clothing, texts, religious ritual items, as well as intangible cultural assets like myths, folk traditions, customs, songs, and dances, urgent protective measures and proper conservation methods must be employed.

At this critical juncture for rural villages, systematically documenting the "nostalgia" through ethnographic imagery will be crucial in continuing historical contexts and cultivating humanistic soil. Since the beginning of the 21st century, an alarming number of Chinese rural villages have been abandoned or extinct due to various factors. Between 2000 and 2010 alone, China lost over 900,000 villages, averaging around 80 villages disappearing each day. For instance, in the author's hometown of Desheng Village, which originally consisted of 11 village groups, all 11 villages were dismantled and relocated during the 2010 period. Subsequently, the areas where these villages once stood have been converted into farmland, erasing the villages entirely. Desheng Village, located in Jiaxing City where rural-urban disparities are minimal nationwide, witnessed even faster disappearance of villages in more remote mountainous regions with limited transportation access. Many of these vanished villages held profound historical and cultural significance.

Therefore, amidst the disappearance of these villages, it is imperative to establish a comprehensive and valuable historical documentation system comprising photo albums and video records. These records should authentically capture the history of administrative and natural villages that have been disbanded, preserving first-hand historical materials for future generations.

The primary role of "salvage-style village Image Chronicles" is to create works that depict the disbanded or disappearing villages through static photos and dynamic videos. These Image Chronicles can be compiled into albums, stored on CDs, or as digital documents, archived in local archives or museums. This documentation serves to authenticate the former existence of these villages, offering memories of past lives to those who have relocated to urban areas. This approach not only serves as a nostalgic portrayal but also represents the final traces of numerous disappearing (or about to disappear) rural China, contributing to cultural heritage preservation. As time progresses, the significance of these historical traces and cultural inheritances will become increasingly valuable, emphasizing the importance of cultural continuity for the Chinese nation.

3.2. The Inheritance of Rural Traditional Culture - "Image Chronicles of Living Villages"

Rural villages in China have not yet completely disappeared but face a series of urgent issues, foremost among them being the phenomenon of "hollowing out." This is the primary problem in contemporary Chinese rural society, characterized by significant population loss, abandoned farmland, loss of traditional cultural values, and breakdown of community ties. What exactly has caused the collective decline of Chinese villages? Clearly, it stems from disparities in economic development, human resources, industry structure, income levels, and quality of life between eastern and western regions, coastal and inland areas, and urban and rural areas.

Therefore, photographers engage in "participant observation-style" village Image Chronicles and local residents produce "subject-based recording-style" village Image Chronicles. Their main goal is to preserve the agricultural lifestyle, enhance community pride, and activate cultural vitality among rural people, thereby combating the "hollowing out" of villages through the creation of photographic works.[3]

3.2.1. Participant Observation-style Village Image Chronicles

Using the method of "participant observation," photographers immerse themselves deeply into rural areas. They live alongside local communities for months to understand the social structure and cultural characteristics of specific regions. Through this immersive experience, they create Village Image Chronicles, capturing key events and striving to establish logical connections or contextual relationships within grand theoretical frameworks. Starting from practical contexts, photographers use Village Image Chronicles to reveal subtle aspects of culture and actions, achieving a deep visual interpretation capability.

To protect dynamic rural cultural heritage, the "participant observation-style" Village Image Chronicles constructed by photographers play a crucial role. They are essential for advancing the cultural heritage protection of "hollowing out" villages. This approach not only documents the current state of villages but also seeks to preserve and revive their cultural essence, promoting a deeper understanding and appreciation of rural life amidst contemporary challenges.

3.2.2. Subject-based Recording-style Village Image Chronicles

In today's China, the widespread use of digital cameras, smartphones, and post-production editing tools has eliminated previous technological barriers. The "subject-based recording-style" of photography involves local residents taking on the role of primary creators responsible for photographic works. They only require basic training in video shooting and editing skills to independently manage the entire process. Visual language, known for its immediacy and storytelling ability, along with its concise graphic structure, provides rural communities with an accessible means to effectively convey emotions and thoughts.

What are the advantages of "subject-based recording-style" Village Image Chronicles? Firstly, residents constitute the main group of creators, possessing deep residential experience and social networks. They have a profound understanding of the local knowledge system and enjoy the right to participate, enabling them to capture village imagery more accurately, deeply, and comprehensively. Moreover, the objective of rural landscape photography has shifted from mere academic exploration or media release to meeting specific community needs in support of cultural survival. Secondly, the production process of "subject-based recording-style" Village Image Chronicles also serves as a teaching and transmission process. Spontaneous documentation and internal communication among residents help enhance social connections between villages, strengthen community cultural identity, and provide visual image data for rural areas.

"Subject-based recording-style" Village Image Chronicles should have their value determined by residents themselves, rather than relying on external observers' evaluations and their consistency with rural labels. This presentation may not completely align with external photographic works but needs to better fit the visual and auditory experiences of local people. Collections of rural photographs in "subject-based recording-style" serve as carriers of local culture and should evolve into image databases managed by rural communities themselves, gradually developing into a new chapter in the continuation of rural culture and traditions.

4. New Media Village Image Chronicles and Rural Revitalization

Image documentation not only preserves collective memories but also showcases the realities of cultural change. Against the backdrop of integrating rural revitalization with cultural tourism in China, Image Chronicles increasingly outline local natural environments, everyday life of the people, and the symbiotic relationships of various forces in rural revitalization. This makes Image Chronicles an essential means to record the intrinsic details of rural society and the process of cultural transformation.[2]

Traditional rural image documentation typically employs institutionalized production, artistic creation, linear transmission, and dominant language descriptions, aligning with broadcasting modes on television, in cinemas, or through online video programs. However, with the current development of internet technology, popular short video applications are gradually disrupting established methods of image transmission, revealing a new pathway for visual communication and interaction.

In the mobile internet environment, short video media exhibits several unique characteristics. Firstly, it features decentralization. The use of smartphones for recording or real-time playback of images no longer requires advanced technical knowledge or expensive equipment. Ordinary individuals can learn to operate these tools relatively quickly, thereby disrupting traditional methods of image creation and transmission. Everyone can become a producer of films and also act as a video anchor, ending the monopolistic position that cultural companies once held over the market. Secondly, short videos are highly interactive. The simplified process of shooting and immediately uploading to relevant platforms emphasizes the communication between content creators and audiences, a feature traditional media cannot match. This real-time interaction makes content presentation more vibrant and dynamic, while also enhancing individual influence (the influencer effect).[4]

Finally, short videos directly relate to economic benefits. Through high levels of user interaction, whether through rewards, gifts, or selling items, creators of short videos can potentially earn real income from their audiovisual products. This differs significantly from traditional media that primarily relied on advertising or subscription fees as their main source of revenue. Additionally, the novel information

dissemination methods enable short video works to rapidly spread and attract substantial attention, potentially drawing interest from more commercial sponsors or increasing audience numbers.

In summary, on emerging new media platforms, short video sharing and live streaming are gradually forming a widely participatory and closely connected "visual economic system." Utilizing interactive image technology helps bridge the gap between urban and rural areas, allowing ancient villages to preserve their residents and cultural heritage. Many individuals empower themselves through online platforms to authentically showcase the customs and traditions of their hometowns via videos and live broadcasts, attracting attention from numerous netizens. This, in turn, promotes the sales of local specialty products and cultural goods, enhances local tourism revenue, and provides a viable path for sustained growth.

5. Conclusion

Due to issues such as population outmigration, idle land, the disappearance of traditional culture, and reduced community relationships, many villages have not completely vanished but have exhibited signs of "hollowing out." Through approaches like the "participant observation" rural documentaries led by photographers and the "subjective recording" rural documentaries starring local residents, we employ these documentary styles to address the phenomenon of "hollowing out." This is done to preserve the vitality of agrarian culture, enhance villagers' self-awareness, and activate the cultural dynamics of rural communities. Utilizing new media platforms such as TikTok and other short video platforms, we can create a new form of rural documentary. It goes beyond being a static and independent historical record or film presentation; it evolves into a vibrant visual channel that connects societal economic development with the cultural life of the entire nation. This dual-purpose approach provides both cultural and economic support to rural civilization.

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2) Jiaying City Science and Technology Plan, "Research on Key Technologies for Virtual Imaging Empowering Beautiful Countryside and Aiding Rural Revitalization," (No. 2022AY30016).

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