

## **Seeing Them, Engaging Them, Narrating Them: Artistic Rural Construction in Chinese Modernization<sup>1</sup>**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper discusses the potential direction of artistic rural construction in the context of Chinese Modernization. It starts with an analysis of the problems faced by the vast rural areas in the context of development and modernization. Then it examines the existing cultural governance and artistic engagement practices in China, summarizing the problems and causes. Then, through the investigation of representative rural cultural governance related policies, the paper draws the important points of Chinese rural cultural governance in current historical period. Finally, a relatively successful case study of artistic rural construction is analyzed to provide further inspiration.

[Artistic Rural Construction, Cultural Governance, Performing Arts, Development Studies]

### **Introduction**

Rural areas are fundamental units and the basic organizational forms of national politics. The roots of China lie in rural and agricultural civilization (Fei, 1992). Synergistically integrate countryside region into the overall national development process is one of the pivotal themes of national governance. The standard of rural governance directly influences the governance capacity of a country as a whole. Also, it impacts the welfare and life quality of 447 million people, accounting for 33.8% of the country's population<sup>2</sup>.

In the context of Chinese Modernization<sup>3</sup>, rural revitalization has been given new heights and requirements in the new historical period. Governments, non-governmental organizations, and social entities are correspondingly exerting diverse efforts to foster genuine rural revitalization and achieve common prosperity.

Among numerous development goals, rural culture, both as a vehicle of rural regeneration and a crucial part of rural residents' lives, has received more and more attention. Thus, rural cultural governance has been taken seriously. And artistic rural construction has become a representative practice in the rural culture development pursuit.

To clarify, culture has the dual dimensions of power and rights. For the former perspective, with the hypothesis of instrumental rationality, culture is one of diverse governance components of a nation, because it could act as a guarantee for social solidarity, bringing people together, promoting positive common awareness, contributing to a nation's long-term stability. From the latter perspective, with value rationality, culture is a part human's innate interest and demands, represents people's pursuit of goodness and beauty, constitutes the basis for distinguishing humans from other beings, and therefore becomes a segment embed within development's ultimate meanings.

Essentially, this suggests a point to be emphasized, that culture is not only a means, which could be utilized as an element of nation governance that aims at regulating social behavior, maintaining social cohesion, or even pursuing interests under the threshold of economic growth. It also contains a purpose in itself, highlights the dominant position of people in the process of development and modernization.

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<sup>2</sup> See: Statistical Communiqué of the People's Republic of China on the 2023 National Economic and Social Development ([https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202402/t20240228\\_1947918.html](https://www.stats.gov.cn/english/PressRelease/202402/t20240228_1947918.html)).

<sup>3</sup> The latest refined comprehensive expression of Chinese Modernization was updated in 2021. The five most significant characteristics, namely large population scale, common prosperity for all people, coordination between material and spiritual civilization, harmony between humanity and nature, path of peaceful development, representatively explains China's current development goals, principles and paths. Chinese Modernization creates conditions for modernization through revolutionary movements of a popular nature. It also provides Chinese solutions to developing countries and regions, providing with the new possibilities of the construction of new political, economic and social order.

## 1. Rural in the scheme of “development” and “modernization”

The rural areas worldwide are undergoing tremendous changes in the backdrop of modernization, becoming some of the fastest-changing places on earth. Under the scheme of “development” and “modernization”, these regions have experienced enormous shifts in economic systems, social structures, and spiritual values. However, there are significant social challenges associated with development and modernization. In China, such issues include limited development opportunities, problems with livelihoods, growing income inequality, hollowing out of villages, urban-rural binary structure differentiation, development dependency, and marginalization of rural culture (Yan, 2003; Long et al., 2011; Bai, 2014; Liu and Li, 2017; Chen, 2019; Lin, 2023).

The problems China is facing now are not just regional or national, but global. Moreover, “development” as social reality is everywhere in some regions with advancement and institutions’ design and implement of ambitious improvement aims, while the improvement of people’s condition results in little success. In the discourse of “development” and “modernization”, an inevitable geopolitical imagination is contained, forming dichotomies relationships such as center-periphery, urban-rural, first world- third world, global north-global south, and also forming an unequal discourse power (Escobar, 1995; Sen, 1999; Peet & Hartwick, 2015).

Therefore, taking diverse efforts to solve development problems is necessary, both for effective governance and for exploring a more suitable development model which possibly benefit and empower more people. To be precise, highlighting the dominant position of rural residents, improving the inequality of development potential and discourse status, revitalizing rural culture, and reforming social structure in the governance goals and process, are crucial.

## 2. Modernization discourse, culture, arts and rural: uneasy relationship

Looking back at global historical experience, material prosperity and technological development are moving forward rapidly in the process of modernization, whereas the advancement of social lifestyles and culture could be slow or even painful (Berman, 1983; Bauman, 1989; O’Brien, 2014: 17-49). Scrutinizing the social reality, rural culture decline during the transition period has also existed in China for not a short time (Fei, 1992; Yan, 1993: 17-42; Lin et al., 2023: 1-23, 47-49), and needs to be solved properly.

In the century-long expectation of reshaping Chinese rural, intellectuals have been flocking to the countryside and accompanying with the revitalization assumption. At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China’s rural experienced a state of disorder with conflicts between Eastern and Western cultures, the collapse of social organizational structures, the decline of the traditional agricultural economy, and the rigidity and debacle of political system. Such situation attracted intellectuals at the time. Social elites represented by Yangchu Yan and Shuming Liang vigorously promoted the construction movement, aiming to enlighten farmers in relatively backward rural areas in terms of culture and art, livelihood, hygiene, and citizenship. Their aim, in general, was to promote development and modernization of the whole country from the foundation. Geographically speaking, such foundation was the populous rural areas. And from the starting point and social construction focus, such foundation must be the re-establishment of national culture (Liang, 2011; Yan, 2014). Unfortunately, their rural construction movement via culture re-establishment ultimately led to an embarrassing situation of “rural movement with rural unmoved”.

To examine the reason objectively, the main contradiction faced by Chinese rural and even the entire country in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was the invasion of imperialism and the remnants of feudalism. Without the establishment of a new unified regime to ensure social stability, as well as a systematic social organization form that could guaranty social action, to talk about cultural construction could be in no position. Whereas, subjectively speaking, social elites’ reform ideas went beyond the social existence at that time and took into no account of “farmers shall have his peace of mind when he possesses a piece of land”<sup>4</sup>, neglecting the most pressing demands of farmers during that historical period. That is to say, their reform intentions and practical paths had neither identified the intrinsic issue of national development at the macro level, nor made the wish of the development subjects’, that is, the rural residents’, a priority at the micro level.

Turning attention to the present, China, having completed the task of poverty alleviation, running its

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<sup>4</sup> An ancient Chinese proverb about governing, originating from *Mencius*.

society much more smoothly, obviously can provide a more solid condition for high-quality development that can better meet people's needs for improved life. Such era promises the expectation of life that carries dual enjoyment of both material and spiritual, also a more systematic path of cultural governance action.

Under this background, artistic engagement has become an inevitable force to participate in rural construction. Diverse attempt has been taken, such as creating art work in specific-site, grassroots-produced rural annual arts festivals, rural theatre outreach programs, artistic packaging and marketing of agricultural products, holding exhibitions, restoring local residences, setting up cultural and tourism interconnected business model. The above-mentioned conception and practice have dynamically achieved results in providing cultural and arts works, promoting aesthetic education, improving rural industrial structure, protecting cultural heritage, and renewing rural landscape (Jiao & Wang, 2019; Wang, 2019; Corlin, 2020; Fang, 2022; Lin, 2023).

In this trend, multiple participants, including but not limited to governments at all levels, non-governmental organizations, institutional arts organizations, for-profit arts organizations, and individuals (such as artists) joint such praxis. These participating entities can be roughly classified into government, market, and social entities, having an isomorphic classification of cultural governance subjects in consensus meaning.

Although having created new form of social praxis, brought benefits to rural area, existed endeavors also show some challenge and points for improvement. On the one hand, the existed practices reflect the initiative of various cultural governance subjects, and also show the presence of both public cultural service and cultural and artistic works with commodity attributes. Different participants have different wishes and starting point, which may be volunteering, self-actualization, reputation, or profit. Carrying out artistic engagement with different intentions and working methods may bring different work results, social responses, and interaction with the locals. On the other hand, all these participants are also actively interacting with the national superstructure and policy discourse of rural revitalization either implicitly or explicitly. Participants' policy interpretation ability, resource endowment, and their agency also affect the final outcome of the artistic engagement in rural. Public cultural services and voluntary artistic engagements generally start are commonly seen artistic rural construction working approach. The former is most frequently embodied with public benefit performances, which are widely popular, but the chain of top-down and down-top policy interaction could be long.

The latter is regularly led by artists, therefore lacks organizational endorsement and long-term mechanisms, thus weakening the effectiveness of communication and acceptance. Friction and disappointment were common. To give an example, Bishan Project, initiated by Ning Ou and Jing Zuo, included some activities such as promoting social interaction among villagers through cafes, exhibiting agricultural-related art creations, and opening book store, aimed to repair the rural social structure, and to enrich rural spiritual life. But the aesthetics and lifestyles of artists and intellectuals were far from that of rural residents. Mobilizing and connecting villagers also seem to be difficult. The artists were proactive, but the local showed reluctance. At the same time, the social resources and funds that artists could allocate were unstable, their professional knowledge structures were relatively single. As a result, the local could get little benefits, the level of consensus between artists and rural residents also got low. Simultaneously, the starting point of restoring cultural traditions and inner spiritual order is inevitably based on the enlightenment superiority of the elites. When the wishes and actions of the interveners exceed the initiative and creativity of the villagers, an unequal relationship between the interveners and local residents naturally exist, making it difficult to achieve the original intention of "symbiosis".

### **3. Understanding the current rural cultural governance with representative policies**

As illustrated, promoting cultural governance is an integral part of achieving rural development, and it is also an inevitable requirement for Chinese Modernization. For a long time, the authorities have never stopped optimizing the superstructure of rural development. In recent years, policy documents have continuously guided the development of rural cultural governance in a positive way.

Policy discourse is one of the most important manifestations of cultural governance. It indicates the authorities' analysis, response and abstract based on social realities such as changes in the social, economic and political environment. An interpretive approach of induction helps to understand the

dynamic adjustment of rural revitalization focus, so as to comprehend the evolutionary logic of rural cultural governance, promoting the effective implement and better praxis. Here in the table Key Point on Rural Cultural Construction and Cultural Governance, the China “Central Documents No.1” from 2013 to 2024 are selected as the main analysis object for the following considerations: firstly, the “No.1 Documents” are of a high level, referring to the first major policy document of each year released by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, which could be regarded as the most important and representative strategic policy document to lead the “Three Rural Issues” (namely agriculture, rural areas, and farmers). Secondly, 2024 is already the 21<sup>st</sup> consecutive year in which the “No.1 Documents” has focused on the “Three Rural Issues”, reflecting an obvious character of policy continuity. With the policies release continually, rural cultural construction and cultural governance has been firmly placed in. Last but not the least, these 12 consecutive annual documents issued after the 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of Communist Party of China display the overall development strategy<sup>5</sup> of the country in the new historical period and new historical orientation.

<b>Key Point on Rural Cultural Construction and Cultural Governance in No.1 Document 2013-2024</b>		
Issuing Department: CPC <sup>6</sup> Central Committee, State Council of PRC <sup>7</sup>		
Issuing Year	Name of File	Key Points
2013	Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Contemporary Agriculture and Further Invigorating Rural Development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Establish socialized mechanism and nurturing diverse rural social service entities.</li> <li>2. Actively promote balanced allocation of urban and rural public resources, improve the rural public service mechanism.</li> <li>3. Implement cultural projects benefits rural residents, establishing a systematic which could guarantee rural culture investment.</li> <li>4. Improve rural governance, strengthen grassroots organization construction in rural areas, encourage rural residents achieve self-governance.</li> </ol>
2014	Several Opinions on Deepening Rural Reform and Accelerating the Promotion of Agricultural Modernization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Add traditional village and residences with historical and cultural value into protection list, increase investment and protection efforts.</li> <li>2. Integrate rural cultural projects and resources that benefit the public and promote the construction and standardization of cultural and sports facilities at the county and township levels.</li> </ol>
2015	Several Opinions on Strengthening Reform and	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promoting the integration of rural</li> </ol>

<sup>5</sup> The 18<sup>th</sup> National Congress of Communist Party of China pointed out the development directions such as coordinating urban and rural development, strengthening grassroots autonomy, deepening economic system reform and solving major structural problems that restrict economic development.

<sup>6</sup> CPC, the Communist Party of China.

<sup>7</sup> PRC, the People’s Republic of China.

	<p>Innovation and Accelerating agricultural Modernization</p>	<p>industries, actively exploring the social and economic value of rural culture, developing tourism villages and towns, activating rural production factors, therefore increasing rural residents' property incomes.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Prompt the integration of urban and rural development, expand support rural cultural and sports facilities' construction, utilize existing resources to build a comprehensive public service platform at the grassroots level in rural areas.</li> <li>3. Advocate for artists to delve into rural areas and create excellent artistic works that typify the local essence and reflect the change of the era.</li> </ol>
<p>2016</p>	<p>Several Opinions on Implementing a New Development Approach and Accelerating the Agricultural Modernization to Achieve the Goal of Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promote the integration of multi-industries in rural areas, transforming local culture, natural landscapes and other resources into emerging pillar industries.</li> <li>2. Increase the protection of rural cultural heritage, develop rural cultures with local characteristics, and intensify efforts to preserve traditional village, residential buildings, and towns with historical and cultural significance.</li> <li>3. Comprehensively strengthen the construction of the public cultural service system, build multi-functional cultural centers at a grassroot level, equipped with service as cultural resource sharing, film screenings, libraries, to maximize the overall effect of public cultural facilities.</li> <li>4. Deepen the enhancement of rural spiritual civilization, foster a harmonious spiritual atmosphere, advocate good family values and the culture of virtuous new local squire, promote the recognition of outstanding grassroots officials and moral models, and encourage the publicizing of valuable traditional culture.</li> </ol>
<p>2017</p>	<p>Several Opinions on Deepening the Supply-Side Structural Reform of Agriculture and Accelerating Efforts to Foster</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Promote the integration of rural industries and the connection of "agriculture-culture-tourism", creating distinctive cultural</li> </ol>

	<p>Drivers of Agricultural and Rural Development</p>	<p>tourism villages and towns characterized by a solid development foundation, unique style, and development potential.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Strengthen the construction of the rural public cultural service system, implement key cultural projects for the benefit of rural residents in a coordinated manner, improve comprehensive cultural service facilities at the grassroots level, arrange public welfare activities for local residents.</li> <li>3. Call for protection of cultural heritage.</li> </ol>
<p>2018</p>	<p>Opinions on Implementing the Strategy of Rural Revitalization</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthen the construction of rural ideology and morals, and promote the development of social morality, professional ethics, family virtues, and personal character.</li> <li>2. Inherit and develop excellent rural traditional culture, protect cultural relics, traditional villages, ethnic group, traditional architecture, agricultural historical remains, and other aspects of rural historical culture. Support the inheritance and development of Xiqu, folk art, minority cultures.</li> <li>3. Strengthen the construction of rural public culture, mainly by focusing on culture service standards setting, service networks establishment, cultural works creating, and cultural workforce training. Improve the rural public cultural service system, enhance public cultural service effectiveness, and strategically allocate public cultural resources towards rural areas.</li> <li>4. Support artistic themes that reflect agriculture, rural areas, and famers; encourage artists to depict the practices of rural revitalization and showcase the image of rural residents.</li> <li>5. Strengthen the construction of rural professional talent teams, combining self-cultivation with talent recruitment in the fields of science, education, culture, and</li> </ol>

		<p>healthcare. Cultivate local talents specialize in cultural work, facilitate cultural mentorship programs.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Guide multiple forces in the society to invest in the rural cultural construction.</li> <li>7. Stimulate rural cultural market, bolster the state of rural cultural market, and energize the regulation of rural cultural industry</li> <li>8. Enrich the spiritual and cultural life of rural residents.</li> <li>9. Develop rural cultural, science and technology, and tourism industries, promote the rural labor absorption, prompt famers' income increasement.</li> </ol>
2019	Several Opinions on Adhering to the Priority Development of Agriculture, Rural Areas and Famers	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Solidly advance rural construction, quickly address deficiencies in rural public services, accelerate the equalization of basic public services between urban and rural areas, and hasten the construction of comprehensive cultural service center.</li> <li>2. Develop new rural service industries, which give full play to rural resources, ecology, and cultural advantages.</li> <li>3. Strengthen the construction of spiritual civilization in rural areas, support the construction of infrastructure such as cultural auditoriums and cultural squares, and cultivate towns or villages with cultural characteristics.</li> </ol>
2020	Opinions on Focusing on Key Tasks in Agriculture, Rural Areas and Famers, Ensuring the Timely Completion of Building a Moderately Prosperous Society in All Respects	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improve rural public cultural services, promote the extension of basic public cultural services to rural areas, and make rural cultural projects that benefit the people more widely covered.</li> <li>2. Encourage literary and artistic groups and artistic talents in urban to go to the countryside, providing cultural products.</li> <li>3. Support the development of local literary and art groups, support the cultivation of rural cultural talents in the form of inheritors of rural intangible cultural heritage, apprenticeships of folk artists, etc.</li> </ol>

		<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>4. Develop excellent Xiqu, folk art, ethnic minority culture, and folk culture.</li> <li>5. Protect historical and cultural villages, towns, traditional villages, ethnic villages.</li> </ol>
2021	Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting Rural Revitalization and Accelerating Agricultural and Rural Modernization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Increase the protection of rural cultural heritage.</li> <li>2. Strengthen the construction of rural public infrastructure, which includes cultural and sports facilities.</li> <li>3. Improve the capability of basic public services in rural areas and promote the integration of urban and rural public cultural services.</li> </ol>
2022	Opinions on Doing a Good Job in Promoting the Key Work of Rural Revitalization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Launch and implement the cultural industry-empowering rural revitalization plan, integrate resources for cultural activities that benefit the people, and support farmers to spontaneously organize and carry out cultural and sports activities with rural and agricultural characteristics such as singing, square dancing, fun sports games, and evening parties.</li> <li>2. Promote the protection and utilization of rural intangible cultural heritage and important agricultural cultural heritage.</li> </ol>
2023	Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting Key Works of Rural Revitalization in 2023	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Accelerate the development of modern rural service industry, which includes cultural and sports services.</li> <li>2. Implement cultural industry empowerment rural revitalization plan.</li> <li>3. Strengthen the construction of spiritual civilization in rural areas and encourage villages to organize mass cultural activities themselves.</li> <li>4. Emphasize the protection and utilization of agricultural cultural heritage.</li> <li>5. Strengthen the team of rural talents, organize talents in science, education, culture, health, social work and other fields to serve at the grassroots level, and support the cultivation of talents urgently needed by the local area.</li> </ol>
2024	Opinions on Learning and Applying the Experience of the Thousand Villages Demonstration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Prosper and develop rural culture and promote the organic integration of</li> </ol>



	<p>and Ten Thousand Villages Renovation Project to Effectively Promote the Comprehensive Revitalization of Rural Areas</p>	<p>agricultural civilization and modern civilization elements.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. Promote the sinking of high-quality cultural resources in the city and increase the supply of effective public cultural services.</li> <li>3. Strengthen the protection, inheritance and innovative development of excellent rural traditional culture, strengthen the excavation, arrangement, protection and utilization of rural intangible cultural heritage, and implement rural cultural relics protection projects.</li> </ol>
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To begin with, these documents reflect a strong cultural governance nature. Service-oriented public culture, multi-subject investment and grassroots self-governance have all been advocated, which can create a foundation for multi-subjects to jointly promote rural cultural construction and cultural governance. Even though among the many governance subjects, government-led actions represented by public cultural service systems and infrastructure construction appear most frequently in encouraging policy discourse, the authorities still call for the participation of diverse entities out of rational consideration that the various social entities' resources could not be complete. In other words, the policy discourse has made a series of official expressions on how rural culture can be promoted by different participating entities.

Further, among the 12 documents, the term related to cultural heritage's protection, inheritance and innovative development appeared 9 times, with the highest frequency, showing China's value orientation of preserving the ancient agricultural civilization, traditional cultural roots, and local characteristics in the process of modernization. This trend is a contemporary response to the historical experience of cultural conflict face by both the east and the west which have been discussed above. Even, the discourse during the past 12 years points to a more detailed characteristic. From the vague expression of "call for protection of cultural heritage" to a clearer expression, citing material and intangible culture forms, such as "protecting cultural relics, traditional villages, agricultural historical remains" and "supporting the inheritance and development of Xiqu, folk art, minority cultures", guiding policies not only left enough space for cultural governance practices, but also provided direction for urgent and prominent governance issues.

Besides, the theme of achieving balanced between urban and rural ran through the documents from 2013 to 2024, demonstrating the authorities' judgement on the regional imbalance of basic public cultural services and cultural resources allocation. In the process of modernization, China's cities have emerged from the countryside and developed relatively advanced civilizational forces, current urban-rural dual structure therefore formed. The differences level of cultural construction and cultural governance capability between urban and rural are due to the disparate productivity, social needs, population structures and development stages. The shifts from resource allocation to the accompaniment with rural cultural talents cultivation, and the promotion of local literary and art groups establishment, policy discourse strives to guide endogenous development, implying that rural culture construction needs to gradually get rid of its dependence on cities.

Moreover, 2018 was a milestone in the blowout of rural construction policies. The No.1 document of this year was the most detailed. At the same time, in the subsequent documents, the dominant position of rural residents has become more prominent, which was shown by the emphasis on "develop rural cultural, science and technology, and tourism industries, promote the rural labor absorption, prompt farmers' income increasement", on the reflection of cultural and artistic works on rural areas, and on rural residents' autonomy of spiritual life and local cultural heritage protection.

To sum up, these policy documents reflect the advocacy of multicultural governance subjects, the call for the preservation of cultural heritage and agricultural civilization, the requirement for coordinated

urban and rural development, and the emphasis on the subject position of rural residents in rural development.

#### 4. Memory of “the Basket”: an artistic rural construction case

In addition to top-level design and policy evolution, the specific artistic rural construction is the intermediary practice that combines the actual situation and implements the rural development aspirations. The analysis of relatively successful cases is helpful to provide inspiration for subsequent practice and research. This paper selects a relatively successful practice that occurred in Changshun County, Guizhou Province where a multi-agent rural cultural governance approach was initially established. The long-term cooperation among local county government and educational cultural institution led to a joint participation in stable resident governmental official collaboration.



Fig.1 Scene from the play

Performed on 25<sup>th</sup> August, 2022, in Tiandengpo Square in Changshun County, Guizhou Province, the Play Spring in the Basket produced by the Experimental Theatre Troupe of the Central Academy of drama sored a triumph and won widespread acclaim, also attracted more than 7000 people watch the performance online. Its successful performance was also a phased result of the long-term cooperation between Changshun County, Guizhou Province and the Central Academy of Drama on rural cultural governance, by which the local residents have gained landed spiritual enjoyment.

Based on real events, the Play Spring in the Basket told a story of a cadre on secondment who came to Changshun county aimed to contribute to poverty alleviation. The plots in the play, such as raising pigs, solving the problem of arable land water supply, planting cash crops, solving the housing problem, were all based on real rural life scenes throughout local development, which really made the local residents feel familiar and resonate. Also, the conflicts of ideas and working methods between the cadre on secondment and rural residents in the county were real. The isomorphism between the resolution of each conflict in the story and real life reflects the social drama (Turner, 1980) nature of this show, providing local audience the possibility to gain a chance of “rites de passage” (Van Gennep, 1977). That is to say, by watching characters in the story have experiences similar to their own, local residents are more likely to face their daily lives and challenges with a better spirit.

The performance was popular among local audience because it adopted the principle of realistic art creation. The scriptwriter chose to travel through mountains and rivers to observe and record the local living conditions, therefore connecting the social facts of rural life with the plot in the script. The reason why he was able to do this smoothly was that both him and the local cadres on secondment were from the Central Academy of Drama. From 2019 to 2024, to respond the targeted assistance policy, the Central Academy of Drama selected a total of 4 “first secretaries” to Changshun County for secondment to solve local development issues, which provided organizational guarantees for subsequent creation work for artistic rural construction. The “first secretary” who worked locally for longer time and served local residents, gained the trust and support, and also integrated into the local administrative organization, being able to mobilize more resources, at last became the doorkeeper connecting scriptwriters and local residents.



Fig.2 Non-professional actors in the play,  
wearing local ethnic clothing

In addition, unlike common rural theatre outreach programs, this play was born and raised in Changshun County rather than being introduced to local and being performed in theatre. It at first began with co-creation based on equal dialogue between artists and villagers. During this process, local agricultural life, traditional clothing, dialects and living habits were seen, studied and incorporated into the work, helped with showing local characteristics. It at last provided with a more accessible square performance, attracting local and online audiences, creating a lively atmosphere for rural performance watching. Additionally, 40 of the actors were non-professional actors from local, accounting for 80% of the total number of actors, promoting the identity transformation of rural residents from spectators of art to participants of art. The director needed to teach the performing movements and facial expressions to these local actors one-on-one. Still, when local residents experience rehearsals and performance with professional artists together, the basic knowledge of such arts genre could be acquired by themselves. Consequently, they are able to rehearse and perform on their own in future, develop mass arts, and even realize cultural governance autonomy from a bottom to top approach at the right opportunity. In this way, a kind of dependence on external cultural resources turns into endogenous cultural and artistic cultivation.

The takeaways that this case can bring to subsequent artistic rural construction are: firstly, in the process of cultural governance, multi-subject cooperation is necessary to integrate different resource endowments and complement each other. Secondly, paying attention to locality is an important foundation for rural arts creation. Thirdly, seeing the rural residents in arts creative intentions, engaging in rural residents' lives during creating process, and narrating the rural and people grow on this land within the artwork constitute necessary triple conditions for artistic rural construction works to be loved by the local, and to truly benefit the local.

### **Conclusion**

Achieving good cultural governance in rural, whether it is an attempt based on instrumental rationality for development or value rationality for individual's spiritual enjoyment, is certainly not an easy task. Specifically, in order to embody the characteristics of Chinese Modernization in nowadays rural development process, to avoid the unpleasant parts of historical experience, good cultural governance superstructure concept, coordinated efforts of multiple governance entities, and the implementation of specific practices, such as successful artistic rural construction, are both indispensable.

This paper, with the reflection of rural area status within development and modernization discourse, the scrutinizing on existing rural cultural governance, especially the practice of modern artistic rural construction, discovered the relatively weak position of rural areas and rural residents. It then concluded the key point of artistic rural construction from the policy analysis and a case study, that is, seeing, engaging and narrating rural and rural residents.

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